Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse
OTSUICHI

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TRANSLATED BY NATHAN COLLINS

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ENGLISH EDITION

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Introduction by Christopher Barzak

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SHUEISHA ENGLISH EDITION

Introduction by Christopher Barzak

Rural Japan is a place where the strange, mysterious, and wondrous seem to permeate the atmosphere. Like fog, this odd magic of the Japanese countryside can appear dazzling and beautiful when the light of day reflects off the droplets of water hovering in the air. But at night, under the moonlight, it becomes eerie and foreboding. In Otsuichi's *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse*, this vision of the writer's homeland as a place where the impossible can happen — and often does — is laid bare.

Otsuichi's perspective on the Japanese countryside resonates for me in more than one way. Because I grew up in the American rural Midwest, the foliage and rice fields of rural Japan do not feel entirely unfamiliar. The children appear innocent, removed from the social anxieties and disturbances of urbanity; the adults are hardworking husbands and wives, fathers and mothers; elders live with their grown children during old age; and the small community binds everyone tightly together: you are known in these kinds of places, because there are so few people to know. There is both the feeling of comfort from being recognized, but also the terrible restrictions that come with it, the inability to step outside of who you are in the small world that envelops you.

But Otsuichi's rural Japan resonates, too, because I lived there for two years, teaching English in Japanese primary and middle schools. And though I haven't returned in several years, when I read Otsuichi's stories — especially *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse* — I am returned to that place where I experienced living abroad for the first time. The happy cries of the children as they play games in the school courtyards; the remains of what was once a castle, decaying in the midst of a village; the rice fields flooded with water; the incessant sawing of the cicadas in the summer. The heat, the sweat that envelops you as you try to sleep at night in your futon, the feel of straw *tatami* mat beneath your feet, the reverberations of a gong struck in the early hours of morning from a temple hidden away in a nearby forest. It is a place where the wonder and terror of existence is tangible: you cannot forget your body in the extreme heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter, and you cannot but fall under the sway of the natural rhythms of life there either. You become enamored with the golden globes of the persimmons in autumn, after the leaves have fallen and the fruits hang like bright ornaments from their bare branches.

These are some of the images and sounds and feelings I carry with

me from the days and nights I spent in an isolated small town in Japan, a town not unlike the one in Otsuichi's first masterpiece, a story published when he was only seventeen years old, which won him a wide audience in Japan. It is one of those small, isolated towns where everyone is polite to one another, helpful, and self-effacing. But beneath the placid veneer of daily life in such places, a dark current flows.

In the case of *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse*, that dark current takes the form of a nine-year-old girl, Satsuki, who is unintentionally murdered by her best friend, Yayoi, who attempts to cover up the accident with the help of her twelve-year-old brother, Ken. This tale of unintended murder among schoolchildren revolves around the axis of innocence and guilt, naivety and experience. The unintended murderer, Yayoi, and her older brother, Ken, spend the majority of the story moving Satsuki's corpse to various hiding places in an attempt to cover up what Yayoi has already convinced her brother was an accident instead of the push out of the tree that leads to Satsuki's death. Some readers may wonder why the children would attempt to cover up what Yayoi has already established as an accident, regardless of the truth, but it makes sense to me entirely. They are children, unsophisticated in the ways of lying. The story is really about how they come to be experienced and savvy in the way of lying and covering up their misdeeds. In Otsuichi's perspective, the story seems to underscore the idea that in order to become adults, people must become adept at lying and hiding their dirty laundry or bad behavior. Without giving away any surprises (and there are many in this spare yet rich story), the children's lack of experience in covering up Yayoi's misdeed becomes a part of the story's amazing line of narrative tension: despite the injustice of Satsuki's death, the reader actually becomes somewhat sympathetic to the children, hoping that they might get away with hiding Satsuki's corpse, that they might preserve their innocence by erasing the event that has unrelentingly hurled them into adulthood and all of the guilt and shame that defines being an adult in Otsuichi's vision.

Despite all of the darkness in this story, though, Otsuichi brings many of the bright charms of Japan alive as well. *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse* is softened by the voice of its own narrator, Satsuki, the murdered child. The narrative effect for Western readers might be reminiscent of Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, although Otsuichi created his murdered child narrator at least five years prior to Sebold. Satsuki's voice haunts this short novel, observing her friends' attempts to hide her corpse with both insight into human nature (after she's passed away from it) and humorous childlike delight. The children's fireworks festival is held amid the search for the missing child; and in

the end, Satsuki ironically receives her wish (from the beginning of the novel) to play the game *kagome, kagome*, a game in Japan that asks an implied question: “Who is behind my backstabbing or defeat?” The answer to this question in the novel itself is ambiguous and complex.

Along with *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse*, this edition includes the gothic short story “Yuko,” which will raise the hairs on the necks of readers as they encounter a post-war Japan in which a young woman is brought to the mansion of a Japanese writer to be his servant. A formidable mystery unfolds soon after she begins work for the writer, and continues to perplex and entice the reader’s imagination even after the story’s close.

Though Otsuichi has many talents as a writer, his most evident skill is in bracing suspense and investigating the nature of unexpected yet daily horrors. Readers who have yet to encounter his bright yet disturbing stories are in for an unforgettable experience. And those readers who have already read some of his other popular titles will be engrossed with these early and remarkable fireworks in a dark, remote sky.

— Christopher Barzak, author of *One for Sorrow* which is being made into the feature film “*Jamie Markes is Dead*”

Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse

Kagome, Kagome,
Bird in a cage,
When will you come out?
Just before dawn
The crane and turtle fell.
Who is behind you now?

—from "Kagome, Kagome,"
a Japanese children's rhyme

DAY ONE

I was nine years old, and it was summer.

Vibrant green trees grew thickly around the shrine and shaded its gravel grounds. The cries of cicadas drifted down from branches reaching upward as if to grasp the summer sun.

"I wonder if my brother and the rest of the boys are done talking yet," Yayoi said to me. "You think they are, Satsuki?"

She was twirling her hair with her fingers, and her eyebrows were scrunched down, making wrinkles above her nose. She sounded annoyed.

"I don't know . . ."

Yayoi Tachibana and I were in the same grade. We were best friends, and we—along with her brother Ken—played together every day.

We were sitting alone on the shaded wooden steps of the shrine, waiting for Ken, who was helping with the preparations for the town's small fireworks show only a few days away.

"He's taking forever," said Yayoi as she looked over at the old stone foundation across the shrine's spacious grounds. "Why can't they just let us girls climb up there too? This is so boring."

The old foundation, a flat, rectangular mound of rocks piled about as large as a warehouse, looked like a small castle built of nothing but dry stone. It stood about as tall as the roof of a house, and I heard that recently, a kid from one of the neighboring villages had fallen while climbing it and gotten hurt.

I was sure some important building had once stood upon that foundation, but that day all that was on top of it were the seated

figures of several of the older boys from the village, who were meeting up there to discuss plans for the fireworks show.

I looked jealously over at the dry-stone foundation and muttered, “Boys are lucky, getting to climb up there.”

Tall trees grew all around it, providing cool shade from the summer heat. It must have felt nice up there. I bet you could see far away. But girls weren’t allowed to climb up. If we tried to, the boys would get mad. Even if we asked first, they wouldn’t let us.

But Ken had told me all kinds of things about it. That from up there he could see my house. That the stone felt nice and cool. That there was a hole among the rocks the boys threw candy wrappers into. That the hole was so big they had to warn the younger kids away from it. I knew all this because Ken had told me so.

“Yeah, real lucky,” Yayoi said. “I wish I was born a boy. If I were a boy, I’d be able to climb the foundation, and I could play with my brother.”

The boys around here didn’t let girls join their games.

As we waited, watching for the meeting to end, we grew more and more bored. The shrine had a small playground—a horizontal bar, a swing set, and a slide—but I didn’t feel like playing on them. They’d be too hot under the summer sun, and besides, they were all rusted anyway. So I preferred sitting in the cool shade.

But Yayoi apparently felt differently, and she jumped to her feet, stretched in an attempt to shake loose the tedium, and said, “Come on, let’s go do something. I’m so bored I could die!”

“But it’s hot out of the shade. I like being cool.”

“Okay, fine. What do you want to do then?”

I thought about it a moment and replied, “I want to play ‘Kagome, Kagome.’”

“But you can’t play that with only two people . . .” Yayoi slumped back down onto the wooden steps of the shrine.

The staircase was old, about five or six steps tall. During the summer fireworks show or the New Year’s bonfire, a box for offerings was placed on the steps. The shrine, also old, was built from dried timber. Although located in the center of the village, it only took on significance when it was decorated for the seasonal holidays.

The buzzing song of an Arabian cicada perched on a nearby tree made the heat feel that much hotter. Even sitting there, idly tracing pictures in the gravel with my finger, I was sweating. A mountainous thunderhead formed animal shapes as it floated in the blue sky.

“Hey, that’s pretty good!” Yayoi said, impressed. She looked back and forth between the gravel and the sky. “It’s a dog, right? Just like the shape of that cloud.”

“Yep. Too bad Six-Six isn’t this cute, right?”

We both laughed. Six-Six was a dog that lived in the village. He was a mutt, white and aggressive, with a habit of stealing shoes. And just then, as if he'd heard our laughter and was not at all happy about it, he growled.

We screamed in unison. "Aaaah! Six-Six!"

The white dog stood right in front of us. Up close, he looked terribly large. His extended claws and hateful gaze sent chills down my spine.

"Yayoi," I said, keeping my eyes on the beast, "we'd better run."

That was what the kids around here usually did when faced with Six-Six's stare. But Yayoi didn't move. She couldn't. I too, despite the advice I'd given only moments before, was frozen like a frog caught under a snake's gaze. I had the feeling that he'd leap for us the instant we made the slightest move.

Six-Six advanced toward us step by step. I half expected him to order us to move out of his way.

The story of an older kid being bitten on the face by Six-Six flashed through my mind, and the vividness of it filled me with dread.

But just then, Six-Six yelped as he was struck by a rock right on the butt.

"Brother!" Yayoi cried out.

Ken was standing farther down the concrete path. With a look of sympathy for the creature, he threw another rock at the mutt. The dog howled at Ken in a voice that could have been heard from beyond the grave and then left, repeatedly looking back over his shoulder in frustration as he went. Six-Six didn't usually give up so easily.

"Are the two of you all right?" Ken asked, smiling to console us two younger girls. Behind his kind demeanor lay the courage to stand up to—and subdue—Six-Six. He was two years older than us and deserved every bit of the pride his sister had in him.

"Yeah, we're fine!" Yayoi said as she flung herself at her brother. "Is the fireworks meeting over? Let's go home. Maybe Midori brought us ice cream today!"

Having been rescued from the terror of Six-Six, I felt my energy drain away. I slumped down upon the wooden staircase and watched Yayoi with envy.

"Yeah, I sure hope so," Ken said. He looked over at me. "But first—are you all right, Satsuki?"

I looked up at his smiling face and nodded.

*

Under the hot sunlight, we walked the winding gravel roads along

paddy fields carpeted green with growing rice all the way to their house, which was quite far from the shrine. The fields lay dry, drained of their water. The process was called “field drying.” The rice plants were deprived of water, and in their thirst they reached their roots deeper into the soil in desperate search of nourishment. The fields were only dried for a few days each summer, but still, I always felt sorry for the rice whenever I saw the cracked, dry earth. But it was necessary to strengthen their roots.

Just as we’d hoped, Midori was waiting for us at Ken and Yayoi’s home.

“Awesome!” Yayoi cheered. “Ice cream! Thanks, Midori!”

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a grin. “Well, go ahead, you’d better eat up before it melts.”

Everyone had finished their work for the day, and Ken, Yayoi, their mother, Midori, and I all sat on the floor around the living room *kotatsu*. (Well, since it was summer, the blanket was no longer draped over it, and the heater beneath it was switched off, so it was less of a kotatsu and more of a low table.) A mountain of vanilla ice cream cups were piled on top of the kotatsu.

“Thanks again, Midori,” said Mrs. Tachibana. “Look at all this ice cream!”

“It’s nothing. After all, it hardly costs me anything. But when you do buy ice cream, I hope you’ll pick ours.”

Midori was the daughter of Mrs. Tachibana’s sister, or something like that. Even in the somewhat dim light inside the house, her snow-white clothes and pale skin shone as if she’d brought the brightness of the outside in with her. She had an air of elegance rare for village women. Midori had graduated from high school that spring and found a job working in an ice cream factory. She lived in the same village as us, and sometimes, on her days off, she brought ice cream over to the Tachibanas’ home.

We lapped up ice cream until our tongues felt funny from the cold. I liked coming over to their house because they treated me like a member of their family.

“Hey, turn on the TV—my *anime* is almost on,” Yayoi said to her mother, who turned the TV on without reply. At my house, asking to turn the TV on at dinner would just start a fight. I was jealous of Yayoi for having a nice mother.

The TV buzzed to life, and after a short while, the picture came up. A picture of a boy filled the screen.

“Not again . . .” Midori said softly, her voice filled with pity and sadness. “How horrible.”

The child, an elementary school student, had disappeared a week before. He was the fifth boy to go missing this summer. The adults all

thought they had been kidnapped.

"It's awful," Mrs. Tachibana said. "Look, that town he's from isn't too far from here."

And not just that one. All the supposedly kidnapped boys had been from neighboring prefectures.

"Ken, you'd better be careful," Midori teased, trying to lighten the mood. "You're such an adorable boy, you might get kidnapped too." Her hair, waist-length and silky smooth, flowed in the air as she faked a lunge at him.

Ken nodded and blushed—a common sight when Midori was around.

Laughter filled the room, only to be broken by Yayoi's shout. "Mom, turn the channel! My anime's starting already!"

Mrs. Tachibana, sitting closest to the TV, sighed and turned the dial. "Okay, all right. But just because food and anime are the only things that will keep you two quiet."

The anime was shown in a marathon until six, and by then we'd made our way through the pile of ice cream cups. For some reason, at six, there was nothing on but news programs, and we quickly became bored again.

So we left to go play in the woods behind their house.

*

At six o'clock in the summer, it's still bright outside. The leaves of the trees formed a ceiling of green above us, and sunlight spilled through the gaps and made patterns on the rocks and the roots that poked up from the ground. The smell of the forest was so enticing I felt like I could suck it in until I choked.

Ken had told us he would come and meet us after he'd walked Midori home, so the two of us decided to climb our tree. It was what we always did when the three of us came to the forest.

Up a few slopes into the forest, there was a clearing with a hill. From the south side of it, you could see the whole village. A single tall tree stood in the clearing with low branches perfect for climbing on its southern face. Ever since Ken found it, the top of the tree had been our secret hideout.

"You mean you can't watch TV while you eat?" Yayoi was asking me. "We don't get in trouble for it in our house."

"Yeah, that's nice. I wish I'd been born in your place."

Yayoi's smile disappeared. She hesitated, then said, "I wish I'd been born in a different family too."

Yayoi jumped onto a rock that rested next to the tree. Ken had

rolled it there from nearby to help us shorter girls climb up onto the lowest branch. I bet that hadn't been easy for him to do.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

Using the rock, I started up the tree after her. Ken had taught us which branches to climb on and in which order to make it the easiest. Our destination was an extra-wide branch that grew near the top of the tree. The view of the village from up there was much better than from the clearing below. You could even see the shrine and the old stone foundation. There was just enough room for the three of us to sit, and just the three of us knew about it.

"Come on, tell me why," I insisted.

"Well, because . . ." Another pause. "My brother and I could . . ."

"Your brother?" I looked up at Yayoi in surprise. She'd already made it to the branch and had sat down.

Moving my way from branch to branch, I climbed up as easily as walking up a staircase.

I sat down on the branch and took in deep breaths of the crisp air. It was cooler and more refreshing than the thicker forest air on the ground.

Among the green paddy fields stretching out below us, red and silver tape glistened in the sun, and the yellow eyes painted on the bird-repellent balloons floated in the breeze. There were even some scarecrows—protecting the rice from sparrows, not crows. Occasionally, they let forth an explosive sound I could feel echo through the pit of my stomach and vibrate through my head. Ken had told me that those devices, called "scare-sparrows," were gas-powered machines with a timer-activated noisemaker designed to frighten sparrows away.

Gazing out at the view, I asked Yayoi, "You don't wish you were born in a different house so you could marry Ken, do you?"

Yayoi widened her already wide eyes even farther and turned to look at me. She seemed to shrink inward, and then she nodded. She pouted her lips and said, "Ken's my brother. I wish he were just Ken and I didn't have to call him Brother." Her legs dangled from the branch.

We were fairly high off the ground, but we never worried about falling. The rough bark wasn't slippery, and children are nimble and quick.

"But Ken likes Midori, right?" I offered.

"I know . . ."

Yayoi had started growing out her hair about a year before, and hearing her confession, I wondered if she had done it to be more like Midori.

Yayoi and I both liked Midori. She treated me no different than she

did the rest of her family, and she gave me all that ice cream. Plus she said my sandals, the ones with the flowers on them that my mother gave me, were cute. It was natural that Ken would like her too.

I understood that brothers and sisters couldn't marry, and yet I was still jealous of Ken and Yayoi spending all their time together.

"Oh, you knew?" I felt bad for upsetting her. Thinking it wasn't fair for her to be the only one flushed and embarrassed, I made a confession of my own.

"Did you know that I like Ken too?"

"What?" It sounded more like a little shriek than a word. Yayoi looked at me in shock. Her eyes burned red, as if reflecting the sunset.

"I . . . I like Ken too," I repeated softly, intoxicated by the thrill of saying it out loud.

At that moment, I saw Ken walking toward us in the distance.

"Heyyy! Up here!" I called down to him, waving my arms wildly. He saw me and waved back at me with both hands. That made me happy.

After a moment I lost sight of him as he passed under more tree cover. Even though I knew it would be a little while before he came out into the clearing, I strained myself this way and that just to see if I could spot him between the leaves.

"There he is!" I caught a glimpse of him running my way.

That was when it happened.

Through my light jacket, I felt a small, warm hand on my back. Oh, that must be Yayoi's hand, I thought, and in that instant, the hand pushed me. Hard.

I lost my balance and slipped from the branch. I saw the leaves rise up around me in slow motion. As I fell I snapped through branches I'd climbed up only moments before and I kept falling. I came down hard on one branch and heard the sound of myself snapping. My body twisted into a wrong shape, and I let out a scream that didn't make it past my throat. And still I fell. In midair, I was sad to see that one of my favorite sandals had come off.

And then, as my back struck the rock at the base of the tree, the one we'd been using as a step stool, I died.

*

Dark red blood flowed from everywhere—from my nose and my ears, from gashes all over my body. Even my eyes cried with it. It was all such a small amount, really, but all I could think was how I didn't want Ken to see me like that.

The snapped tree branches thudded to the ground around me, and

scattered leaves floated down onto my body.

"Hey, what was that noise?" Ken called out, running to the tree. "It sounded like a snapping tree bran—"

Seeing my body, he froze.

Yayoi was climbing down the tree in tears. Since my dead body was currently occupying the stone, she leapt down to the ground from the lowest branch. She stood up, bawling, and wrapped her arms around Ken.

Ken regarded his sister and my corpse with a reassuring smile and, like a parent calming his crying child, asked, "What on earth happened here, Yayoi?"

He came closer to me and said, "Satsuki, you're dead, right?"

That settled, he again cast his smile upon his sister.

"I need you to stop crying and tell me what happened."

Yayoi, seeing him beaming at her, stopped crying and said in a slow, wavering, and pained voice, "Well . . . we were talking up on our branch . . . and . . . Satsuki slipped and fell."

"Oh, so she fell? Well, you couldn't have done anything about that." He spoke in a persuasive, grown-up tone. "You didn't do anything wrong, so don't cry."

He turned back to look at me. "We'd better tell Mom. Come on, let's go."

Ken took Yayoi's hand to pull her away.

But she shook her head forcibly, no no no, refusing to budge.

"What's wrong, Yayoi?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated as she thought of an excuse. "Well, wouldn't Mom be upset if she heard about this? I don't want to make her sad!" She burst into tears.

I could sense that Yayoi was afraid. She was afraid that someone would find out what she had done.

He thought it over. "Yeah, you're right." Almost to himself, he said, "Not just Mom, but Midori too."

His face lit up with sudden inspiration. "That's it! Let's hide Satsuki. We'll be fine as long as nobody finds out that she died here!"

Yayoi looked at her brother with a mixture of sadness and happiness.

My eyes, frozen open, could only gaze at them with envy.

*

"But how are we going to do it?" Yayoi asked. "We don't have a shovel or anything to bury her."

"I know," Ken answered with a kind smile that could dash away all

of his frightened sister's worries. "That's why we brought her here, right? Just leave everything to me, and you won't have anything to fear."

He was carrying me over his shoulder, taking care not to let any of my blood dribble onto his back.

We were near the edge of the forest along an empty road that passed through the woods.

Yayoi looked around, puzzled. "What are we going to do here? How can we hide Satsuki?"

Ken laid my body upon the ground and lightly brushed away a patch of dirt, revealing a row of concrete tiles the size of cutting boards that covered a ditch. He bent over and pried up one of the slabs. The ditch appeared to connect to a creek that ran all along the paddy fields. But that day it was dry and contained only empty space. Ken lifted a few more tiles. The ditch was fairly wide, and he was able to fit my body snugly inside.

He then lowered the concrete slabs back into place, just as he had found them. They must have been heavy to move. But Ken silently went about his work.

"Brother, wait."

Ken, just about to lower the last slab, stopped, holding it in place.

The gap was a window, just one tile wide, through which my feet could be seen. On one foot, a sandal. On the other, only dirt. I felt self-conscious under their intense stares.

"I see," said Ken, unconcerned. "I guess we'd better go look for the missing sandal."

Ken unceremoniously lowered the final slab, sealing me in darkness. He then covered the tiles with dirt once again, concealing the ditch from casual observation.

Yayoi and Ken worked together to hide any evidence that the earth had been disturbed, and as they finished, the sun sank beneath the horizon.

*

Just like any other evening, the Tachibana family was all gathered in their living room. Dinner had been served on the kotatsu-turned-dining table, and the small room was filled with the smells of delicious food. Ken's grandmother and grandfather had just returned from working in their fields, and his father, wearing a sleeveless undershirt, was sitting in the strong cool breeze of an electric fan and watching a baseball game on the TV.

"Dad, change the channel," Ken said. "*Starship Sagittarius* is about

to start. You know Yayoi watches that every week." He looked to his sister for support. Starship Sagittarius was an anime program about three lovable characters working together to pilot their starship across the galaxy. Yayoi, who hadn't been paying attention to the conversation and had a mouthful of food, frantically nodded her head up and down.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," their father replied, timidly turning the TV dial. "Since nobody seems to care what I want to watch."

"And turn the head of the fan over here. We're hot too."

Their father pressed the button to oscillate the head of the fan without a word. It was one of those older models with a pin sticking out near the motor that you press to start the fan's panning movement.

When her brother said turn the head, Yayoi shuddered, remembering the way my neck had been twisted around in the fall.

Starship Sagittarius started without regard to Yayoi's mental discomfort. Her grandparents talked about their fields, how their watermelon crop was growing, how their rush mat was getting old and needed replacing, and so on.

"Excuse me," came a voice from the entryway.

Mrs. Tachibana replied with a loud "Coming!" and went to the front hall.

Yayoi, upon hearing the voice from the front door, began to tremble. Ken had surely recognized the voice too, but he didn't have the slightest reaction. He just kept on quietly eating his dinner and watching the anime.

Before long, Mrs. Tachibana came back into the living room. She had left the caller waiting at the front door and quickly motioned for the two children to come over.

"Hey, Satsuki's mother just came by, and she says her daughter hasn't come home yet. Do you know anything?"

Ken noticed that the hand Yayoi held her chopsticks with was shaking and answered for the both of them.

"No, we split up in the forest. Same as always."

"Oh, I see . . ."

Leaving further comment until later, Mrs. Tachibana went to the front door to tell my mother. Disappointed, defeated, and on the verge of tears, my mother said only, "All right," and headed back home. It hurt to see her like that. She looked so terribly small as she walked away—nothing like the angry demonic mother who yelled at me not to watch TV while we ate.

Mrs. Tachibana stood there watching my mother leave, then went back into the living room.

"I'm worried about Satsuki," she said, taking another mouthful of

white rice. “It’s already dark out. Where could she have gone at this hour? And with all these kidnappings? I’m really worried.”

Each time her mother said *I’m worried*, Yayoi lost a little more strength and lowered her head a little farther, as though trying to hide from her mother’s gaze.

Ken asked his mother, “Is Satsuki’s mother going to look for her in the forest?”

“Yeah, it sounds like it. Satsuki was an only child, after all, so I’m sure she’s all the more worried. I wonder what happened? She was saying it might be best to tell the police.”

“The police?” Ken and Yayoi said in unison. The two looked at their mother—Yayoi with desperation and Ken with something that looked like excitement.

“Well, don’t you think this could be related to those recent kidnappings? She was last seen in the forest, right? There might even be a search party out there tomorrow. Even if she hasn’t been kidnapped, she could be lost in the woods right now. Her mom said she’d start looking right away.”

The two kids hadn’t expected to hear talk of the forest, but it was the most obvious place to look for me. Aside from the forest behind their home, there wasn’t anywhere else in the area where a child might get lost.

When Yayoi heard that my mother was searching the forest, her expression froze. My body wasn’t in a place where it would be discovered, and the two of them had cleaned up all traces of blood. But they hadn’t been able to find my missing sandal. Ken had climbed back up the tree to see if it had gotten caught on a branch, and Yayoi had searched the ground until her back ached. But no sandal.

If the sandal weren’t discovered, the police would likely consider my disappearance a kidnapping and would focus their search outside the forest. But what if my mother found it? She would recognize it immediately. She would remember how happy I’d been when she gave them to me.

“I’m really worried,” Mrs. Tachibana was saying. “Maybe I should help her look.”

I couldn’t tell if Ken was listening or not. He was sitting there, amused, watching the anime on TV.

*

Ken and Yayoi shared a bedroom. The room was twelve feet long on each side, which was more space than they needed. The night was hot and humid, and the large bedroom window had been left open in an

attempt to cool down the room, if only a little bit. There weren't any burglars around to worry about in that area, anyway. A night-light provided the room with dim yellow-orange light, and a blue mosquito net hung suspended from the ceiling, draped down over two futon mattresses spread out in the middle of the floor.

Ken was asleep, breathing quietly. But Yayoi couldn't sleep. When she closed her eyes, she couldn't stop thinking about what had happened that evening.

"Hey, Brother . . ." Yayoi said, nearly crying. She was wrapped in a towel cloth blanket—we called it a *towelket*—barely enduring the heat. Her bangs were plastered to her forehead with sweat.

Ken sleepily mumbled a response and sat up. It was so hot he had pushed not only his comforter aside but his towelket as well. He stood and reached up to turn on the light. He had hung a cord down from it so he could switch it on and off without getting up, but the cord was laying on top of the mosquito netting. He tried to tug the cord from under the net, but it kept slipping through his fingers.

"Don't worry about the light, Brother."

"All right," Ken said, still half asleep. "Well, what's the matter, Yayoi?"

"I'm scared. Could I . . . come over there with you?" Her voice was embarrassed and pitiful. She was sweating so much it looked like she might boil away.

Ken took a moment to respond, then said brusquely, "Oh, sure," and laid back down on his *futon*.

Even in the heat, Yayoi kept her towelket wrapped around her, as if hiding something, as she crawled over to his futon. She pressed her warm forehead against his back and closed her eyes.

And as the room filled with the peaceful regular breaths of sleep, the dark curtain of night fell over Ken and over Yayoi, over my corpse hidden in the ditch, and over my mother, weeping as she searched through the forest.

Day Two

Early the next day, Ken and Yayoi went to their morning exercise session, a sequence of group calisthenics choreographed by radio and held at the shrine every day during summer break. The shrine felt pleasant in the morning, and the cool, crisp air was revitalizing. As the sun began its ascent into the sky, the few cicadas that had begun singing earlier were joined by a full chorus.

After the exercises were completed, a sixth grader (the oldest grade

schooler in the village) made a stamp on the attendance cards of the children present. He commented on how I wasn't there that morning, but Ken ignored him as if it were not his concern. His attention was elsewhere.

Behind him, some of the mothers were whispering to one another. They were talking about me and my mother, saying that she had searched for me through the night and how sad it all was. Even though it had all happened just last evening, word had already spread throughout the village. The police would begin their search of the forest in the afternoon. But since nobody had yet found any evidence of wrongdoing or any clues as to my whereabouts, the women doubted that anything would turn up in the woods. And some were saying that I was another victim of the serial kidnapper.

Ken was eavesdropping on the women, gathering all the information he could. Two facts were plain: the police were coming, and my sandals hadn't been mentioned in their conversations.

Ken stared off into the distance, lost in thought, and Yayoi clung to his arm, gazing up anxiously into his face.

*

As soon as they got home from exercising, Ken and Yayoi went straight through their back door to the forest. While walking the gravel road as it cut through the dried paddy fields, Ken made a suggestion.

Since the sandal had apparently not been found yet, they just needed to find it first.

That way, Ken's reasoning followed, there wouldn't be any evidence that I was still in the forest. Everyone would surely assume I had been kidnapped and taken somewhere else.

And so they made their way deeper into the forest, searching for my sandal as they went. Ken wanted to look on the steep slope below the tree and so was wearing a pair of baseball cleats instead of his usual straw sandals. But first they checked the area around the ditch where I was hidden. Finding nothing there, the two headed back up the path toward the tree where I died, their eyes focused down along the ground. Ken thought that maybe the sandal had fallen off my foot when he carried me slung over his shoulder on the way to the ditch.

"The slope is too dangerous, Yayoi. Why don't you go on home? Just let your brother handle it from here."

Ken was trying to be considerate, but Yayoi just shook her head, wrapped her arm around his, and stood firm.

"No! I'm going with you!"

“All right.” He looked down at her and spoke like a father dealing with a stubborn child. “Go take another look at the area where Satsuki died. You remember what the sandal looks like, right? See if you can find it.”

Yayoi’s cheeks flushed. “Okay, but if I call for you, you’d better come right away. I mean it.”

Ken gave her a reassuring smile and nodded, yes, yes, I will.

They had arrived at the place where I died. But still no sandal. Our tree stood above the southern slope, quiet and peaceful, as if the day before had never happened. The rock had been wiped clean and showed no traces of blood. The broken branches and fallen leaves were gone too. Ken and Yayoi had carried them off. All they had left to fear was a single out-of-place sandal with a single flower on it somewhere in these woods.

Maybe it’s fallen all the way down the slope, Ken thought as he gazed down the incline. The village shrine, elementary school, and the faraway cluster of houses looked small in the distance.

Yayoi looked down at the same landscape, thinking the same thoughts as her brother. The slope was probably too steep for her to climb down without cleats. She could slip and get badly injured, or even die.

The two children steadied their resolve for the search ahead.

Then Yayoi cried out, “Oh no! Brother, look!”

She pointed to a small road visible from the slope. The road climbed up into the forest, passing right by the ditch where I was hidden. Cars almost never used that road, but at that moment, there were two.

Ken and Yayoi both realized immediately what the two brown passenger cars must be. Police. Ken had figured they would come around noon to start the search, and there they were.

Ken got a thrill watching the cars make their way up the road.

Yayoi, her face twisted in fear, tightly held on to Ken, following him as he rushed down the hill.

The two cars turned off the road and into the forest, passing—of all places—right over my hidden body. Dust fell onto me through the cracks between the concrete tiles. But I couldn’t move aside, and I couldn’t close my still-open eyes or mouth.

The cars stopped in a small clearing connected with the forest trail. Several men, all of them dressed for hiking, emerged from the vehicles, and by the way they talked I could tell they had come to search for me. I could also tell, from some scattered laughter, that they doubted I was lost in the forest.

Ken and Yayoi couldn’t see any of this from the slope. Ken listened to the sound of the cars stopping. He had probably predicted that they

would park in the clearing. He smiled, maybe because his assumption was correct, or perhaps because the irony of the tires crossing right over the ditch in which he had buried me pleased him.

"Change of plans," he said. "We're going to hide. Let's spy on the police from behind the trees." He wanted to find out as much as he could about their search.

Ken gently took his sister's hand and led her off the trail and into the woods where people normally never went. He walked along, carefully choosing a route where Yayoi wouldn't slip or get hurt, where she could walk easily, and where they wouldn't be spotted by the search party.

Ken held the entire layout of the forest clearly in his head, and within a half hour or so he knew how many people were searching, what they were doing, and even where they were at each moment.

The search party, however, was completely unaware that they were being watched.

And as the search party—expert investigators all—began their investigation, and the two children, familiar with the forest, shadowed them, the cries of the cicadas echoed through the summer forest.

*

By evening, the search party had found nothing, and their search grew half-hearted. I couldn't fault them for it. They didn't know if I was even in the forest or if their efforts mattered at all. As they tired, the search started to wind down.

Throughout the forest, the members of the search party welcomed the announcement that came over their radios. The search was called off for the day, and the teams of detectives headed back to the clearing.

Ken was somewhat disappointed, but Yayoi, pressed up against him, let out a breath of relief.

"They're all meeting back up now," Ken whispered. "We should go too." He hoped to overhear more valuable information when the search party gathered at the clearing, and he pulled at Yayoi's arm to leave. She followed, her shoulders hunched from fear.

As they passed near the ditch that hid my corpse, Ken saw something that made him stop.

Close to the ditch the two children had camouflaged with dirt and mud stood two policemen in matching blue uniforms. The taller one was saying something to his partner, a short man with a cigarette in his hand.

Yayoi paled. Ken grabbed her by the shoulders and hid in the tall

grass. They held their breath and listened. Ken took in every word of the officers' conversation without so much as a single drop of sweat forming on his expressionless face.

"Hey, would you just forget about it?" the cop with the cigarette was saying. "We're done for the day, and everyone's waiting with the cars. We're supposed to go out for drinks tonight, you know."

"Don't be like that," the taller one replied. "I mean, that girl . . . What was her name? Satsuki, right? I know she was probably kidnapped, but . . . doesn't something about this area strike you as odd?" He gestured at a section of the forest—right in the direction of my body.

Ken's mind was racing. *What does he see? That ditch should be completely hidden by the dirt, like just any other part of the forest*. The boy's face remained confident.

"Not particularly, no."

"Look, see over there? There's a bunch of markings in the ground, like from cleats. Children's cleats. Probably ones for playing baseball."

Ken hadn't thought of the consequences of wearing cleats to climb down the slope. He kept silent as he listened to the two detectives talk, but his eyes began to work back and forth as if he were measuring something in his mind.

"Yeah, but we're looking for a girl, right?" the smoking cop said after a drag from his cigarette. "Besides, the mother said she was wearing sandals."

Disregarding his partner's lack of interest, the taller man walked over to where I was hidden and stooped down to inspect the dirt.

Yayoi, frozen with overwhelming dread, could only stare at the scene unfolding in front of her.

"Whatever, we're quitting for the day," the disinterested cop continued. "It looks like we're all going to have to come out here again tomorrow. Dig all the holes you want then. Come on, everyone's waiting for us."

Ignoring his partner's protests, the man closer to me brushed away a layer of dirt with his gloved hand, revealing the gray slab of stone beneath. "Hey, there's concrete here. A small waterway, maybe? Hidden under the dirt."

"Come on, hidden? Look around you. There's dirt everywhere. That dirt probably accumulated over time until it was just another part of the forest floor. It's part of nature."

But the taller one wasn't buying it.

He slowly lifted one of the concrete slabs.

Yayoi gave a silent scream.

"See? Nothing there," said the smoking cop, flicking ash to the ground. "Well, I don't know about you, but I've had enough of

crawling around in the dirt for one day. I'm leaving."

Beneath the slab was only a dried-up empty space. The detective was standing just a little bit down the ditch from where I was hidden. If he had lifted up the tile three to the left, he might have seen my toes.

"Don't be in such a hurry." The taller officer's voice was firm. "We've got decades left to drink before we die."

He moved one tile to the left and lifted. One tile closer to me.

"Bzzzt!"

"Would you shut up!" The policeman at the ditch was indignant. "Go ahead, have your laugh now, and just see if I let you borrow any money from me ever again." He put his hand on the next tile. Just one more after that . . .

"Brother!" Yayoi was crying now, unable to withstand the terror any longer. "We need to get out of here! Run!" She tugged forcefully at her brother's arm. But Ken made no signs of moving. His eyes, fixed on the two policemen, were sharp and cold, not those of a weak child.

The cop with the cigarette said mockingly, "Sorry, sorry. Keep going, who knows, maybe there'll be something under the next one!"

"Yeah, yeah. You'll be sorry all right."

The next slab lifted, and a slash of sunlight fell across my big toe, delivering the living warmth of the summer heat to a part of my cold corpse. If the policeman just lowered his head a little, he might have been able to see the tip of my toenail. But his face showed no signs of recognition. Just one more tile and even a complete fool would notice me.

"Brother!" Yayoi implored, almost shrieking, but not loudly enough to be overheard from the clearing.

Ken, giving no response to his sister's cries, picked up a rock larger than his fist from the forest floor. Yayoi watched him move, trying to guess at what he planned to do with it.

"That's it, one more, and we're going," the uninterested cop said. "Not that it'll make a difference anyhow."

The detective at the ditch moved to the next tile. "Fine, this will be the last one. But we'll be back to do the rest tomorrow."

He gripped the edge of the slab. *Lift it. Just lift it and you'll see my feet.*

Yayoi's pulse was racing. The pounding of her heartbeat echoed in her ears.

Ken acted. He took the rock in his hand and swung it upward, bashing it against his own face. Again and again he swung with all his might.

The officer braced himself and began to lift up the concrete slab.

Blood streamed from Ken's nose and started dripping from his chin.

Reflexively Yayoi shouted, “Brother!”

Her scream sounded like a piece of silk fabric tearing right down the middle.

Shocked by the sound, the detective let the concrete slab fall from his fingers. Both officers turned to face the source of the yell.

Ken, his face covered in blood, gave his sister a stage wink and walked slowly out into the open.

He stood in front of the officers, faking loud cries of pain. Yayoi was still clinging to him.

“God, his nose is gushing blood!” the cop with the cigarette exclaimed.

His partner, standing only inches away from my body, called out, “Kid, what happened to you?” and started to walk over to the blood-soaked boy. Away from me. “Come here, let me take a look at you.”

The receiver hanging on the back of his belt announced, “We are waiting for you at the meeting point. Report back immediately,” and the two detectives exchanged bitter smiles. The day’s search had ended.

“Well, the first aid kit is in the car, anyway,” the taller cop said. “I’ll take the boy over there. You’d better put that slab back on straight, otherwise we won’t be able to drive the cars out of here.” He took Ken, still wailing, and Yayoi, crying from shock and fear, by the hands and started to walk away.

“Hey, wait a minute!” his partner yelled after him. “You’re the one that dropped this thing! Pick up your own damn mess!”

But the taller one just kept on walking, children in tow. Yayoi was worried. *The police have us*, she thought, repeatedly looking back over her shoulder in panic. *What if the other one looks under the concrete? If they figure it out, we’ll never get away*.

The other policeman, muttering a string of complaints, slid the heavy tile back into place.

Meanwhile, the detective asked Ken in a gentle voice, “So kid, how’d you get hurt? What happened?”

Ken toned down his crying enough to reply, “I slipped and fell.” A sob. “Down the steep hill.” He lifted up a hand and pinched his nose together to stop the blood.

Whether the cop was satisfied or not, he didn’t ask any more questions.

Ken’s clothes were soaked dark red with blood. Drops of blood rolled down from his hand holding his nose and dripped from his elbow.

Yayoi was still clinging to his side, and the blood fell onto her long hair—the hair she’d grown out just to be a little more like Ken’s crush, Midori.

*

Earlier that day, Midori sat on the wooden steps of the shrine, two steps from the bottom and three from the top.

She had stopped in at the Tachibanas' and had been considering if there was any way she could help with the search when she decided to make a detour to the forest shrine.

Her long hair flowed down from underneath a white wide-brimmed hat, and her white skirt rippled in the soft breeze. The skirt was long enough that she had to hold its hem with her small, delicate fingers to keep it from resting on the earth. She looked up at the cicadas noisily chirping away in the trees and remembered that the fireworks show was coming soon—only two more days.

The children bought the fireworks with money collected door-to-door—not much, just a few hundred yen at a time—from the villagers. They couldn't buy the serious stuff, just the smaller fireworks you could buy in any store, but everyone looked forward to the show anyway—even the adults, who came each year to pray to the gods of the shrine and watch the fireworks.

Midori recalled that the collection box was usually positioned right on the steps on which she was sitting. Lost in her memories, she sat and watched the sunlight spill through the gaps between the leaves. The patterns made by the light and shade flowed and changed, never forming the same pattern twice.

Midori traced her finger along the lines of the old wooden steps and wondered aloud, "How many times did I come here to play when I was a child?" The grain of the wood was rough to the touch.

Midori had told me once that she was from here. She even told me about this boy she liked, and how he had rejected her. She had joked about how Ken resembled that boy.

"Oh, is that supposed to be a picture of a dog?"

Midori had noticed the figure drawn in the dirt at her feet—the picture I had drawn the day I died. She leaned down to get a closer look at the drawing, her waist-length hair swaying in the breeze, and said, "I used to make drawings like this, back when I didn't care if I got mud on my fingers."

A dog barked.

Startled, Midori snapped her head up. In front of her, poised to pounce, was a white dog.

"Oh, hello there, Six-Six. It's been a while."

Six-Six, tail wagging, leaped at Midori, licking at her face and covering her white clothes with muddy paw prints.

"I've missed you, boy."

Six-Six rolled onto his back and looked up at her, his tongue lolling

out in a dog's version of a grin.

"I guess this is where I used to bring you treats, isn't it? Although I admit it was pretty mean of me to throw them down below the stairs."

Midori had told me once that she was the one who gave Six-Six his strange name.

"By the way," she said, tapping the dog on his nose with a dainty finger, "you've earned quite the bad reputation around here!" Her smile beamed like the sun, as if she had been reunited with a long-lost childhood friend.

"I hear you're a shoe thief now. So where do you keep your stash?"

Six-Six gave a short yip and circled around behind the staircase. The side of the stairs had an opening big enough for a dog to fit through.

Midori peered in after the dog.

"I knew it, here they are!" she said, satisfied with herself. "But there's so many of them!"

Beneath the stairs was a jumbled pile of unmatched shoes. Once she had recovered from the initial shock, she found herself impressed at the number. The dog had sprawled out among his spoils in a manner both regal and shameless.

Shaking her head, Midori started to straighten up, thinking that maybe she should check back with the Tachibanas. Perhaps something had turned up in the search. But something she saw when she raised her head made her stop—one solitary item at the edge of Six-Six's mountainous collection.

Mindless of the dirt she was getting on her clothes, Midori lowered herself in and reached for the object. Her fingers found their target, and she retrieved it from beneath the steps.

Pulled from the darkness was a single sandal—a sandal with a flower on top. And Midori knew whose it was.

A shadow seemed to pass over her narrowed eyes, and behind them flashed a flicker of foresight. As she gazed in the direction of the Tachibanas' house, a wrinkle of doubt formed between her perfectly shaped eyebrows.

She returned the sandal to Six-Six's cache and left. She headed, not for the Tachibanas', but for her own home.

The day is over, anyway, Midori thought to herself as she walked across the shrine grounds. I'll visit the Tachibanas tomorrow. Oh, and didn't I leave some new trial flavors of our ice cream back in my freezer? I should just spend the afternoon eating that and watching talk shows. The serial kidnapping can wait for later.

Walking along under the summer sun, she could feel the heat of the gravel through the soles of her shoes.

*

Night fell, and the raucous singing of the cicadas faded into silence, and the countryside, bathed in the pale light of the moon and the stars, fell into slumber.

The concrete tile above where I lay was lifted up by Ken's hand. Beside him stood Yayoi, who nervously looked at my corpse.

The search party was coming back the next day, and that clever cop might find me. Ken had recognized that the time had come for me to be moved.

That evening, he had been led back to the two police cars and received treatment for his nosebleed. A large gash ran across his nose where he had bashed it with the rock. He was then asked his name and where he lived. The officers had known that Ken and Yayoi were the last two people to see me before my disappearance, and when Ken admitted his name, they had a lot of questions for the two children.

"Did you see anyone suspicious?" Ken could answer that one honestly. "No, I didn't," he replied. Yayoi had thought it might be possible to make up something, anything, to make the police think my disappearance was connected with the serial kidnappings, but she stuck to her brother's answers. The safest thing to do, Ken had reasoned intuitively, would be to avoid telling many lies, and only cover up what they absolutely had to. Create too many lies, and they could start to contradict themselves.

Standing in the beam of Yayoi's flashlight, Ken lifted me in his arms and carried me out of the ditch. He had a large bandage right in the middle of his face.

"I'm scared, I'm scared," Yayoi said softly, again and again, as she turned her head to look in every direction.

When Ken had woken up in the middle of the night, Yayoi, who had been snuggled up next to him, woke with him. Ken had instructed her to stay in their room, but she was far more afraid of being left alone without him than she was of entering the forest at night. The two children slipped out from under the mosquito netting and tiptoed carefully along the old squeaky floorboards of the hallway. Taking care not to awaken any of their family, they gathered up the tools they'd need.

Ken laid my body, colder than the chilly night air, to rest upon a rush mat that had been spread out on the ground, and straightened out my haphazardly twisted limbs. If I had been standing, I would have been at attention.

"It looks like we might have cut the matting a little too short," Ken said with a dry chuckle intended to calm Yayoi.

He wrapped me in the matting so that Yayoi could help carry it

when he started to tire. It must have been difficult for Ken to carry me the day before. Or maybe he'd just had enough of my dangling, lifeless limbs.

Ken had salvaged a discarded rush mat, and before leaving the house, he had used a pair of sewing scissors to trim the matting to match my height. Only he had misjudged the size, cutting it short, and now my toes poked out from one end and my hair spilled out the other.

He then tied up the bundle tightly with string so that it wouldn't fall open as he carried me.

When they were leaving the house, Yayoi had been unable to find any string and was in a panic. Their mother always saved the wrappings and string from when she went shopping, saying that they'd come in handy one day. But the children didn't know where she stored it all. They obviously couldn't wake up their mother and ask her, and the string, though needed at long last, would have to remain unused. Instead, they took the cord that hung down from their bedroom light. Ken and Yayoi would just have to stand up when they wanted to turn their light off.

Ken slid the concrete tile back into place and hoisted me over his shoulder like a piece of timber.

"Brother, where are we taking Satsuki?" Yayoi asked, afraid of what the answer might be.

Ken, walking back toward their house, answered, "To our room. From what I saw watching the search party today, I think that's the safest place now."

I was rolled up neatly into the matting, my limbs cooperating and not hanging down.

"We'll hide her in the closet," he explained, "and we'll keep watch in there all afternoon. But we won't be able to keep her in there forever. So we'll have to find another hiding place, and fast."

Yayoi kept the flashlight pointed downward, lighting the path in front of her brother. His face, barely visible at the edge of the light, was awash in excitement.

Ken and Yayoi brought me into their room and placed my body in the closet. They closed me inside there—Ken, as if hiding a valuable treasure, just a naughty child pulling a prank, and Yayoi, as if to hide away her terror and her unease, to keep her sin far from God's eyes.

The paper door of the closet slid silently shut.

DAY THREE

Ken and Yayoi were not prepared for what they saw when they returned home from the morning exercise class. Not only was their mother preparing breakfast, but she was also getting everything ready for the kids to go to school.

"Quit dawdling, you two," she scolded them, setting their breakfast on the dining table. "You know there's school today."

They had completely forgotten.

The summer morning sun was glaring down, and the world outside the window was blindingly bright.

Ken dropped his rice into his soup, *miso* with seaweed and onions. "Mother," he asked, "where are you going?"

She was headed for their bedroom.

"I'm putting away your futons. And the mosquito net. You two aren't tall enough to bring the net down from the ceiling hooks."

Yayoi looked at Ken, frightened. Their futons were always stored away in their closet, where I had been hidden. If their mother opened the closet door, she'd discover what they had done. Yayoi's worry showed on her face.

But Ken remained calm. He answered coolly, "Don't worry about it, Yayoi and I will do it. It'll build character, right? So just eat your breakfast and let us take care of it."

"That's awfully grown-up, coming from you," his mother replied skeptically, but she was clearly happy to have one less chore to do. She walked into the kitchen.

Ken and Yayoi shoveled down their food and went back to their room.

"Brother, what are we going to do? She could come in here while we're at school!"

Yayoi was on the verge of tears. Ken had climbed onto a chair and was deftly detaching the blue mosquito netting from the corners of the room.

"We'll be fine, Yayoi." He smiled at his sister reassuringly. "If we fold up the futon mattresses and stack them on top of Satsuki, Mom won't notice anything."

Ken folded the mosquito net into a small bundle and placed it in the closet. The closet was divided into two sections, top and bottom. My body lay in the upper level, where their futons were usually stored. The netting was on top of me.

In the bottom section of the closet, there were old floor cushions, winter clothes, an outdated vacuum cleaner, and so on.

"But, but . . ." Yayoi protested.

"We'll be fine." Ken's smile had a funny way of being reassuring, even when no proof was there to back the words.

Yayoi wiped away her welled-up tears. She folded the yellow

towelket, a gift from Midori, that she wrapped herself in every night.

Ken folded up the two futons and carried them to the closet. Lately, Yayoi had been sleeping next to Ken, but they were still in the habit of setting both of them out.

One futon was piled on top of me and then the other. I felt the oppressive weight pressing down on my body. Had I still been alive, in this hot, humid weather, it would have felt so awful that I would have died.

"Darn," Ken said. "Her feet are showing."

The futon didn't quite cover my feet. And neither did the rush mat, which had been cut too short. My feet—one wearing a sandal, the other barefoot—were plainly visible. I felt self-conscious under their stares. Had I been alive, I would have blushed.

"Here, use this, Brother." Yayoi held out her yellow towelket.

Ken took it from her and placed it over my feet. He stepped back and looked at the closet, making sure I was completely hidden. "Perfect," he said, happy with their work. Seeing Ken's satisfaction, Yayoi felt glad too. Her face flushed a little.

The two children took one last look, making absolutely sure that no part of my body was visible, and then slid the paper door shut.

They filled their backpacks, unused for over a week, with their notebooks and finished homework.

"School only goes through the morning today," Ken reassured his sister, packing the last few things for school. "So there's really little chance that anyone will find Satsuki."

They walked out the front door together, the voices of the cicadas already chirping around them. The brilliant green rice fields, still dry, basked in the warmth of the sunlight. The arms of the trees seemed to reach up, grasping at the clear blue sky.

Upon everything but me, morning came, and everyone but me was alive.

*

Our grade school had only one class for each grade, so Yayoi and I, being the same age, were in the same class. It was time for the morning homeroom.

"Teacher, Satsuki isn't here yet," the girl in the seat across the aisle from my empty desk reported to our teacher. I had been missing for only three days, and none of my classmates knew about it. Well, none of them except for one.

Yayoi paled and began to tremble. She strained not to look at the girl who spoke or at my empty seat.

The teacher hesitated, then replied, “Satsuki is . . . home sick with a cold.” She faked a smile. “Take care not to get sick now, all of you.” She must have heard from my mother.

The class replied cheerfully in unison, “Yes, Teacher.” The children’s beaming faces were full of brightness, as if the future had been promised to them—and if it hadn’t, you’d want to promise it.

“Brother . . .” Yayoi softly cried out to herself, quiet enough so that no one would hear. She shrank down into her chair, and her legs were shaking. She thought that maybe if she just said “Brother,” he’d come to save her.

His words replayed in her head. *We’ll be fine. Nobody will find her. Nobody but us knows*. She stared down at the scribbles scratched into the surface of her wooden desk until her racing heart calmed down.

Patience, she thought to herself. *It’s only one morning*. Then she noticed that the teacher was staring at her.

And walking slowly toward her.

What did I do? Did she notice me? She certainly had been shaking enough to be noticed.

Yayoi’s heart started thumping in alarm. She began to sweat all over.

The teacher stopped next to her desk. A hand reached down to her tiny shoulder.

She wanted to run. She wanted to run straight to Ken’s classroom.

She must have figured it out! She’ll capture me and take me to the police! Yayoi couldn’t banish the thoughts from her mind.

The teacher put her mouth to Yayoi’s ear and whispered so that none of her classmates could hear.

“You know that Satsuki is missing. How hard this must be for you, being her best friend.” The teacher’s face was filled with pity. “But please, don’t tell any of your friends. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Yayoi’s head snapped up to look at her teacher. It took a moment for the girl to grasp the meaning of her words, but when she did, she nodded furiously.

“Yayoi . . .” The teacher grasped Yayoi’s hands consolingly and then left the classroom before she drew the attention of the rest of the class. It was time for the short break between the first and second hour.

To Yayoi, her classmates seemed to rush around her, dancing and spinning.

And she realized, to her relief, that she was saved.

A cool breeze drifted into the classroom, and I could sense all her sweat being carried away.

*

"We're home," Yayoi called out as she walked through the front door. Ken followed her in.

After the scare in first period, the rest of the morning passed uneventfully. Yayoi's class was let out early, but she gloomily waited a half hour or so for Ken to get out so they could walk home together.

"Mom, where are you?" Yayoi asked. "I'm hungry!"

Hearing no response, the two children went to their room."Mom!" Yayoi cried sharply.

Their mother was inside their room. She had opened the door to their closet and was searching around for something inside.

Ken casually asked, "Mother, what are you doing?"

She was digging around in the closet, taking things out and putting them back in, not from the upper section where I was hidden, but rather from the bottom level. But the futons and towelket had been nudged aside a bit, and my hair and toes were just barely visible.

"My vacuum machine is acting up," she answered. "And just as I was thinking I'd clean your room for you. I was going to drag out that old one I had. I know I put it in here somewhere."

"You don't have to, we'll clean our own room," Ken said. "Why don't you go watch that show you like. You know, *Laugh On*? Right, Yayoi?"

Yayoi looked at her mother with wide, surprised eyes and nodded rapidly.

"You will?" Mrs. Tachibana closed the paper door, stood up, said, "Well, that would be nice of you," and left.

Yayoi, realizing that she had been holding her breath, let out a sigh of relief. Ken set his backpack down unceremoniously on his desk.

Yayoi opened her mouth to ask where they'd hide my body next. "So, Brother, what—"

Their bedroom door slid open, and their mother's face peered through the crack.

Yayoi's mouth was frozen open, but Ken asked, "Did you need something else, Mother?"

"I forgot to tell you. Your lunch is ready, so come and get it. You can clean later."

"Yes, fine." Ken's brusque answer must have been enough for her, and she shut the door.

Yayoi unfroze and exclaimed, "That was scary!"

Again the door slid open, and again through the crack popped the face of the persistent Mrs. Tachibana.

"What was scary?" asked the face.

Yayoi whipped around to look at the door and froze again, once

more on the verge of tears.

"Well," their mother said, "I don't mean to bother you."

"Mother, what is it?" asked Ken. "You're being a pest."

"Well, I don't know what you mean by that. But you've been an awfully good boy lately, Ken. Putting away your futon and doing your cleaning, you're like a kid on an after-school special."

Ken curiously tilted his head to the side. "Now I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been getting along very well with your sister. It's like you two are hiding something from me. That's all I wanted to say."

The door closed. Ken strained his ears, listening to their mother's footsteps walk down the hallway.

Fearful, Yayoi asked, "Is she gone?"

Ken nodded, then turned to Yayoi and smiled.

Their mother's last words still on their minds, the two children opened the closet door to make sure I hadn't escaped.

*

Ken and Yayoi finished their lunch and went back to their room to discuss their next move.

"Brother, what are we going to do?" Yayoi, barely holding back her tears, sounded distressed. "I don't think we can leave her here any longer . . ."

But Ken already had a solution. Wearing a self-assured expression, he replied, "I've been thinking. Maybe you've had the same thought too, even if you weren't quite aware of it." He shrugged. "We could just throw her down the hole in the stone foundation at the shrine. No one would ever find her. And then everyone will think that she was just another victim of the serial kidnapper."

Yayoi nodded in agreement.

One of the stones on top of that old foundation on the edge of the shrine grounds had fallen loose, revealing a pit shaped like a well. The boys used it like a trash can, throwing away candy wrappers and empty bags. And Ken meant to dump me in there with the rest of the garbage.

We should have thrown her in there from the start, they were thinking.

"Okay," Yayoi said. "But when are we going to carry her there?"

"That's a good question. We should do it as soon as possible. We don't know when she's going to start to stink in this heat."

Yayoi, picturing my body rotting and smelling, scrunched up her face in disgust.

In just a number of hours, it would be two full days since I had

died.

"We'll do it tonight," Ken stated. "Tomorrow is the fireworks show, right? I bet there'll be a lot of people around there tomorrow night."

The festival, even as small-scale as it was, was attended by over half of the village.

Yayoi, finally seeing an end to all this, appeared relieved. "Sounds good to me, Brother. We'd better go to sleep early. A nap would be good too."

Ken looked at his sister, pleased. But part of him was disappointed to have it end. He was enjoying this.

As Ken tore the bandage from his face, he wondered if that clever policeman from the day before was just then lifting the concrete tiles from over the ditch and if his loudmouth partner was having a good laugh. Ken's cut had closed over, forming a scab. He tossed the bandage into the trash and opened the closet door to start cleaning like he'd promised his mother. That old vacuum cleaner should be in there somewhere.

"Come on, Yayoi, let's clean up the room before we nap. Mother will be suspicious if we don't."

"Oh, right."

"I'll help too." The door slid open, and the two children were startled, eyes wide and bodies stiff, at the sight of the unexpected visitor.

"Midori!"

"Hiya! I brought you a brand-new kind of ice cream today." Midori looked proudly at the children, white plastic sacks dangling from her hands. Droplets of water had formed on the plastic. "It's not even in stores yet, so you'd better thank me!"

"Sure, Midori," Ken said, sliding the closet door shut behind his back. "Let's go eat in the living room." Yayoi nodded her support. But Midori didn't go along with it.

"No, Mrs. Tachibana—your mother is passed out in the living room. Let's eat here. Hey, I'll even help out with your homework."

Yayoi looked nervously at Ken, who, seeing no way out of it, nodded.

"Oh, well, I don't see why not," Ken said. "Hold on, I'll get the floor cushions out." As he opened the closet door, Yayoi held her breath. He took a cushion from the lower compartment, handed it to Midori, and then took one for himself and one for his sister and laid them on the straw *tatami* mat floor.

Midori looked up at the fluorescent light.

"Hey, didn't you used to have a string attached to the light?"

"It broke off," Ken said quickly. "It was pretty old."

"Yeah? That's funny, usually that kind of string is a lot tougher

than that."

They all reached for the ice cream at the center of the table.

"Wow," Yayoi said. They hadn't seen that style of ice cream before. The containers were tall and transparent, and the ice cream looked extravagant, like a chocolate parfait you'd get at a nice restaurant.

They took the attached long wooden spoons, also something of a novelty, and started eating.

"It's delicious!" Yayoi exclaimed.

"Of course it is, it's from our factory. Be sure to tell all your friends. But this ice cream is special. It costs more than our usual products."

The three continued to talk as they ate, and when Yayoi had finished hers, she scraped the insides of her cup for any precious remains with her spoon and licked it with her tongue. They chatted for a while and then moved on to Ken's and Yayoi's homework.

"Let's see, A Summer Friend." Midori picked up Yayoi's summer workbook. "Some friend! These workbooks haven't changed a bit since I was your age. Now, what's your assignment for today?"

On the front of the book were the words *A Summer Friend*, and below that, *Grade 3*. I had been given that same book when the spring semester ended. It was still sitting on the desk in my room.

"Hey, nice work, Yayoi. You've done very well. Ten years ago I fed this stuff to my dog. Just kidding."

Ken looked at Midori and asked, "You turn twenty this year, right?"

Embarrassed, she scratched her face and admitted it.

Midori looked through Ken's workbook and said, not without amazement, "And it looks like you're doing even better, Ken."

Ken and Yayoi started their studies, asking Midori, who was lounging behind them, whenever they had a question.

After that had gone on for about thirty minutes, Midori became bored. She started to talk about me.

"Really, I wonder what happened to Satsuki. I hope she's all right, but . . ." She looked at—no, observed—their studying figures.

In stark contrast to Ken, who hadn't shown any movement, Yayoi's shoulders twitched.

The motion was not overlooked by Midori. Her dark, emotionless eyes bore down on the two children.

"Yeah," Ken said. "I just hope she wasn't killed by that serial kidnapper."

"Oh?" Midori's perfect lips formed a half-amused smile. Her expression and voice were filled with interest. "You think Satsuki was kidnapped? They haven't said anything about that on the news."

"Could it be anything else? The search party hasn't found anything, so it must have been that kidnapper. The news was saying they never found any clues with the other kids either. And the kidnappings were

all in prefectures near here. Mother was even saying how it was odd that none of them happened in ours."

"Hmmm. You have a point. But maybe the kidnapper had a reason for staying away from the children in this prefecture. Still, I didn't know you were such a smart boy, Ken." Midori meant the praise.

Ken's face turned a deep red. Embarrassed, he blurted out, "Um, I'll —I'll get some coffee," and left the room.

Midori watched him with a smirk and turned to face Yayoi.

The girl had slumped onto her desk, asleep.

Midori giggled. "Oh, did you fall asleep? You must be so tired."

Careful not to wake her, Midori gently laid the child down on the tatami floor. When she saw the pencil-mark math equations imprinted in reverse on the girl's cheek, it took an effort to keep from laughing.

She sat there fondly watching Yayoi sleep, but after a moment Midori quickly rose.

"I'd better cover you up with something before you catch a cold. Where's that yellow towelket I gave you?" Walking softly so as not to wake the young girl, Midori moved toward the closet.

Slowly, quietly, she slid the closet door open.

"There it is!"

She saw it right away. Right in front of her face lay Yayoi's yellow towelket. Well, I should be a little more precise. It wasn't just lying there—it was hiding my feet, which stuck out from the rush mat, a thin, fragile barrier between me and discovery.

Midori grasped the edge of the towelket and started to pull.

The towelket gently slid toward her, and the light pressure against my leg slowly lifted.

Just as the far edge of it was about to slip off, it caught on my toenail.

Midori was suspicious. She pulled harder, and the towelket broke free, and she held it completely in her hand. My feet were uncovered. But at that very instant . . .

"Aaah!"

Ken had fallen down, knocking into Midori. She went tumbling to the woven-straw tatami floor. The boy collapsed on top of her, dropping the small round plates and the cups of iced coffee that rested on them, spilling their contents everywhere. The glass coffee cups didn't break, and the three of them had somehow avoided the flying splash of coffee, but it was still a terrible mess.

Yayoi was awakened by the clatter. Rubbing her eyes, she looked up and saw my pale blue feet.

Her breath caught, and she snapped completely awake, but she wished it was all a dream.

"Ow ow ow ow . . ." Midori looked around at the floor and said,

half angry, half laughing, “Ahh, the floor is soaked. But at least I’m still dry. Ken, I know you want to cool off in this heat, but that was really too clumsy of you.”

She hadn’t seen me.

While Midori was still inspecting the floor, Yayoi rushed over to the closet and shut the door. Midori didn’t seem to notice that either.

“I’m so sorry,” Ken said as he gathered up the dishes, the cups, and the ice that had been in them. “My foot must have caught on something. I tell you, it’s been causing me nothing but trouble lately.” When Midori wasn’t looking, he signaled a thumbs-up at his sister.

Yayoi brightened and chirped, “I’ll go get a washcloth!” As the girl ran to the door, Midori called to her.

“Yayoi, wait.”

She froze and looked uneasily at Midori, who was helping Ken pick up the spilled ice.

“Careful not to wake up your mother. If she saw this mess, she’d freak.” She raised her pointer fingers to her forehead, making little devil horns to illustrate her point.

“I won’t!” Yayoi said and ran out the door.

*

Night fell. It was time for those still living to rest.

Once the roads had emptied of the villagers, Ken and Yayoi started to transport me out toward the shrine. They took care not to be seen. It was crucial not to be.

Yayoi rubbed her tired eyes, savoring her lingering dreamlike haze, and asked, “Brother, what time is it?”

Ken was carrying me over his shoulder. His voice was sharp and sober. “Half past three. We need to hurry if we’re going to make it by dawn.”

The two of them—or should I say, the three of us—had just left their home, which was quite far from the shrine. Even the normally unflappable Ken was daunted by the distance.

No matter how much he talked like an adult, he was just two years older than me. It was hard work to carry me by himself.

“Are you okay?” Yayoi asked, holding the flashlight aimed at the gravel road in front of them as she walked by his side. “Do you want me to carry her legs? Brother, are you okay?”

The round light of the flashlight spilled over the sides of the road, bringing the long slender green shapes of the rice leaves to dim light.

The shrine was still far, and Ken was slowing down.

“Yeah, let’s do that. Thanks, Yayoi.” He held my legs out to her.

She transferred the light to her brother and took my legs with both hands, a look of distaste crossing her face.

Ken was struck with an uncharacteristic regret. *I should have brought a wheelbarrow from the shed.*

For the first time he truly understood how far away was the shrine, and how heavy my corpse.

The light of the moon and the stars was faint, and the two children walked through the darkness. Occasionally they would stop, rest, say a few needed words of encouragement to each other, and then start again.

"Brother, I'm tired." She paused, out of breath. "Can't we just finish this tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" He considered it. "Well, the fireworks are tomorrow, but I suppose by this hour everyone should have gone home. But where would we hide Satsuki tonight?"

Yayoi's youthful face scrunched up in thought. Ken took a moment to come up with an idea, waving away bugs that were drawn in by the flashlight. But he had set out to carry me to the stone foundation and throw me into the hole that night, and that was what he still meant to do.

"Come on, Yayoi, we're almost there. Just a little farther, and we'll be able to make sure that no one will ever know what happened to Satsuki."

He summoned every last bit of his willpower to move forward. Yayoi, who had sat down on the gravel, stood back up.

If they threw me into that pit, would anyone ever find me? The stone foundation was as big as a warehouse. No matter how much trash all the boys threw down there, the vast, empty, black space within would never fill. The structure had withstood the wind and the rain. It had lasted long after the people who built it, and it would last long after the memories of the kids who played on it faded away.

But just as they had gathered the resolve to carry me again, they saw it.

"Brother, look! Over there!"

Ken had noticed it at the same time. Far off, near the end of the road, from beyond a row of houses, came a light. It was a flashlight, and it was being carried. It was too far to see if a person was holding it, but if it wasn't a person, what else could it be?

Ken and Yayoi's flashlight, which they had set down on the ground as they rested, illuminated them from below. Did the other person notice it? Even if their figures weren't visible, surely the light was.

"Brother, what are we going to do?!" Yayoi cried out in complete panic. "Brother!"

Ken was focused in thought and didn't respond.

“Brother!”

The light was approaching them. It was drawn to their flashlight, no different from the insects.

Ken, having come up with a plan, quickly looked at their surroundings to make sure it was without fault.

The figure of the person carrying the flashlight was not yet visible. And there weren’t any places to hide. The road was surrounded only by the expanse of rice fields.

“Yayoi, over there!” Ken grabbed his sister and pushed her into the dark green carpet of leaves behind them. Next he picked me up, and taking care not to obstruct the light of the flashlight, he ran in after her.

They ran through the field until they could barely see their flashlight, and then they sat. The rice, reaching up to receive the life of the sun’s rays every summer day, had grown just enough to hide us as it swayed in the breeze.

They held their breath and silently watched the light approach. The night was hot, and soon Ken and Yayoi began to sweat. The fresh scent of the young crops was stifling.

Their timing had been good. The fields were being dried and the earth was bare. Otherwise, their feet might have gotten stuck in the mud as they ran. If the field had been submerged, Ken may not have even thought to hide in it.

“Brother,” Yayoi started to whisper, but Ken cut her off with a clipped *shush*.

They could now make out the figure that was walking toward them, and they recognized him at once. Old Man Thunder. That was what all the kids called him, partly because he looked like a character from a *manga* called *Mr. Thunder*, and partly because he often yelled at us when we played too much. He and several of the other elderly residents of the village met at the shrine each morning before the radio exercise to play gateball. I think he might have even been in charge of the group.

Old Man Thunder walked up to the flashlight the children had abandoned in the road and inspected it with a tilt of his head. Keys jangled on a key chain hung at his waist. They were the keys to the shrine’s storeroom, where the gateball equipment and various other things, including farming implements, were kept.

Ken and Yayoi watched him, rapt. Yayoi pressed up against her brother to stop herself from shaking. The wind was still that night, and the two were dripping with sweat. Their sweat mingled together as it dripped onto the rush mat that covered my body, which lay on the dry earth.

Yayoi was barely keeping herself together.

Old Man Thunder lifted the flashlight from the ground. His thoughts were plain to see in his puzzled expression. Why would a switched-on flashlight be lying in a place like this?

From that expression, Ken knew that they hadn't been seen. His assumption had been correct—if all they could see of him was his light, then he couldn't have seen anything but theirs.

But they weren't safe yet.

The old man switched off their flashlight and panned his own over the area. He was thorough, as though searching for a fleeing rat. Thunder felt like he had seen something running into the field as he had picked up the flashlight, and he carefully passed his light back and forth over that direction. Ken and Yayoi stiffened, and each time the rice in front of them was bathed in the bright light, they feared that their shadows would be projected onto the plants behind them. *Why does he keep pointing the light over here?* they both thought, feeling like escaped convicts under a searchlight's pursuit. Each time the light passed over Yayoi, she could feel the police on her trail.

After a time, Old Man Thunder noticed something. In the direction he thought he had seen someone run, the rice was waving back and forth. But the rest of the field was still in the now windless air.

He stepped into the field, and as he pushed his way through the rice plants, he felt the dry earth crumble into dust beneath his feet.

The children sensed him drawing nearer and froze completely. Ken's mind raced.

Even if he finds us, as long as he doesn't find the body, won't we be fine? But if he tells our parents, how will I explain it?

The old man was walking straight at them, and soon he was only one row in front of them, reaching his arms to push a path through it.

Yayoi's eyes were filled with tears, and she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming.

It's now or never. I have to stand up and lie to him and say that he caught us pulling a prank. And I have to do it now.

That was his only plan. If he'd had a weapon to kill the old man and keep his mouth shut forever, it would have been different.

And just as Ken was about to stand up, a voice called out to Old Man Thunder.

"What are you doing out there?" It was the old man's wife. "We need to set up for gateball. Everyone will be there soon."

Old Man Thunder scratched his head in embarrassment. "Well, I just . . ."

He walked back to the gravel road and away from the two children and me.

He showed her the flashlight. "Look, I found this on the road here."

"Oh," she remarked. "I wonder whose that is, dear."

She was curious, but not curious enough. She took her husband's hand and started walking in the direction of the shrine. Old Man Thunder kept looking back at where we hid, but he went with her.

"They're probably all there by now," his wife said as they walked away. "You know we have to get everything ready and start practice soon, before we lose the space to the kids on summer break and their radio exercises."

They kept talking as they disappeared into the distance.

"That was close," said a relieved Yayoi. She felt light, even giddy. All her tension had been hanging by a thread, and the thread was cut. Ken couldn't help but laugh at the unforeseen turn of events.

But quickly his expression darkened.

"What do we do now though?" he whispered. If the gateball club was already at the shrine, they might be seen lifting me up onto the stone foundation. Had they missed their chance?

Worry returned to Yayoi's eyes. "Brother . . ."

"Well, it doesn't matter." Ken smiled reassuringly. They had lost their flashlight, and dawn had not yet broken the darkness of the night, but Yayoi could tell he was smiling without having to see it.

He continued, "We can just leave Satsuki here for now. Nobody bothers with the fields when they're dry."

During field-drying time, no one came to tend the fields. The flow of the water wasn't restricted at the site of each field, but rather controlled at one location higher upstream. That way the water could be stopped for all of the fields simultaneously.

"So let's just go home," Ken said. "We'll come get her after the fireworks are done tomorrow. Or maybe even the day after. We'll have plenty of time."

They moved me even deeper into the field where I would be less likely to be seen and started to walk back home. They didn't have a light, and Yayoi had to struggle to make the long walk back in the darkness.

But soon, from the east, the sky began to slowly brighten. The light looked like it was shining into a deep blue sea and lighting the way back to their home.

"Wow . . ." Yayoi said with heartfelt awe. It was the first time in her life she had seen a sunrise.

Not two hours had passed since they had left their house with me. As the sun reddened the morning sky, the path they had left to walk grew shorter and shorter.

DAY FOUR

The next morning passed uneventfully, as if the events of the past few days had never happened.

Ken and Yayoi had gone back to their room to get what little sleep they could before their mother came to wake them. Then, just like any other day, the two children left for the morning exercises. They walked along the road they had carried me down hours before, passing by the field I was hidden in with feigned indifference. The funny thing about Ken was that when he pretended not to care about something, he started to actually feel apathetic toward it. Yayoi was gripping his shirt as she walked alongside him.

After the radio exercises, Ken said to his sister, “You can go on home. You won’t have anything to do here, anyway.”

On a normal day, they would get their booklets stamped and go home together, but today was different. The older boys were to stay at the shrine to get ready for that night’s fireworks show. The preparations were fairly simple—taking the wooden benches and the collection box from their resting places in the storeroom and making sure all the fireworks they had bought were in order.

“No, I’ll stay here,” Yayoi said, smiling at her brother. “It shouldn’t take very long, and I can wait.”

She followed her brother as he walked around the shrine looking for the storeroom key. Two radio exercise attendance booklets dangled from a string around her neck.

Ken approached a group of the elderly gateball players who had gathered by a corner of the shrine. Yayoi stood behind him, hiding herself.

“Excuse me,” Ken said in a raised voice. “Could I borrow the key to the storeroom?”

“For the fireworks show, is it?” a relatively athletic senior replied. “I had almost forgotten.”

He nodded to Ken and said to the man standing beside him, “You’ve got the key, Tanaka, don’t you? Give it to the kid.”

Yayoi peeked out from behind Ken. When she saw the face of Mr. Tanaka, she snapped back behind her brother and buried her face in his back.

The man named Tanaka, with gray hair and thick eyebrows, had almost seen the two kids early that morning. It was Old Man Thunder. But the old man showed no sign of recognition.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got the key,” he said. “We might as well put away the gateball equipment while we’re at it. Help me out, Kobayashi, will ya?”

“Sure,” the able-bodied senior replied. “That’s it for today, everyone.”

The rest of the elderly left with their gateball sticks, while Old Man

Thunder and Kobayashi, carrying the U-shaped gates for the gateball game, went with the children. The seniors kept the gates in the storeroom, taking them out each morning for their practice games.

Ken hadn't reacted when confronted with Old Man Thunder, but Yayoi was visibly nervous. She clutched at the back of her brother's shirt and kept him directly between her and the old man as they walked.

"Aren't you the Tachibana boy?" Old Man Thunder asked. "I forgot your name."

"Ken. And this is Yayoi. Say hello, Yayoi."

At her brother's insistence, Yayoi bowed to the two men, her eyes pressed shut as if she expected her head to be bitten off.

The two older men smiled at her, but quickly their faces darkened.

Kobayashi looked at Yayoi and asked, "Were you friends with the girl who went missing the other day?"

She shrank inward and nodded dejectedly. Her reaction was that of fear and unease, but the two men didn't read it that way.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Kobayashi apologized. "I shouldn't have brought it up. But you need to be careful now, we wouldn't want you to be kidnapped yourself." He looked at Ken. "Take care of your sister, young man."

"Yes, sir!" Ken answered boldly, and the two men nodded in approval. Yayoi knew he was putting on a show for the seniors, but that didn't stop her from feeling a little happy to hear the words. Neither did it stop her cheeks from turning a bright red.

The four of them stood in front of the storeroom door, which looked to be the only sturdy part of the structure. The door was made of metal and looked extremely heavy. Old Man Thunder set his armful of gates on the ground and removed the key ring from his waist. He inserted a key marked STOREROOM into the lock and turned it.

"There, the lock's open," he said.

Ken tried to move the door with all his strength, but it wouldn't budge.

"What's wrong?" Ken asked the two men. "I can't get it to move."

Kobayashi answered, "Sometimes this door can be a bit stubborn. It worked fine when we got everything out this morning, though. The pulley might be jammed. I told them to come take a look at it, you know."

Kobayashi set down the gates he had been holding and joined Ken at the door. Yayoi and Old Man Thunder stepped up to help too. But even with all four of them pulling together the door only jiggled in place. It looked like they'd need a little more strength to open the door.

A voice called out to the struggling, red-faced foursome. "Hey,

there! What's wrong? You guys seem to be having trouble!"

It was Midori. She was in jeans, strolling over to them a little more leisurely than they would have liked.

"Help us out," Ken said to Midori, who had stopped to watch. "You're right, we are having trouble here."

"You're getting ready for the fireworks show, are you? Keep up the good work, and all that." She laughed. "Since you're trying so hard, I suppose I can help you out. You'd better thank me."

She joined them at the door, and with her added strength, the gate screeched its way open.

Ken whispered. "You're crazy strong, Midori."

She gave him a pat on the head and strutted into the storeroom. The others followed.

The room was dark and humid and reeked of straw. Haphazardly piled inside the large room were farming implements including hoes and spades, cardboard boxes with contents unknown, bits of lumber, and countless other objects. Motes of dust drifted through the sunlight shining in through the open door like microbes floating in the deep sea.

"There's all kinds of things in here," Yayoi whispered with genuine interest, looking all around the room.

Kobayashi set down his pile of gates, their blue paint peeling here and there, in a corner of the room and said to Old Man Thunder, "Tanaka, while we're in here, we might as well replace that old pulley on the door."

Without waiting for a response, he pulled a wooden box down from the top of one of the piles of stuff.

Inside the box were several unused, shiny dark gray pulleys. They were very large, each with a hole near the top for metal fittings to pass through. The two men gathered the box of pulleys and a selection of tools and went to the door to take it down and repair the pulley.

Ken, leaving them to their work, went to retrieve the wooden collection box from the rear of the storeroom. The box was small and used only during public events such as the fireworks show that evening, but it was still too heavy for Ken to lift by himself.

"I'll help you," Midori offered. "Really, whatever would you do without me?"

Midori and Ken dragged the box to the middle of the room. They stood at opposite ends of the box and lifted it up to carry it outside. Since there wasn't enough room for Yayoi to help carry it, she just walked alongside her brother, watching him and Midori with an uneasy boredom.

As the three passed through the storeroom door, they thanked Old Man Thunder for his help. He responded with a yell, "Hey! Careful,

we're taking the door down here!"

The kids carried the box over toward the wooden shrine. Setting it in place was Ken's only task for the morning. After that he'd say goodbye to the older boys and would be free to go home.

"So when are you two coming to the fireworks?" Midori asked. "You are coming, right?"

They both nodded. They intended to forget about me during the fireworks show. Besides, they certainly couldn't move me to the stone foundation during the event. It would be too risky with all the potential witnesses around. I was safely hidden in the rice fields, and they could take one evening and not think of me.

"Well, then I guess I'll come too," Midori said. "Did you hear? The other kids are doing something interesting this year."

Yayoi asked, "What do you mean, interesting?"

"They're taking some string, and they're running it all along some of the fireworks they bought, so they'll all light up at once. They're calling it Niagara Falls." Midori laughed. Her face was radiant, like a sunflower in the morning light.

Yayoi's eyes lit up. "Really? Really?" She pictured it in her mind. All the beautiful sparkling flower petals of light bursting into bloom in unison, then the dazzling waterfall cascading back down, powerful, fantastic, and fleeting.

"Really," Midori said. "So don't be late."

Yayoi gave several enthusiastic nods.

Midori said, "You'd better stop that before you make your eyes spin!"

Yayoi was elated. She had been so depressed lately that I'd forgotten what she looked like happy. If I were to compare her expression to a season, it would be summer.

Midori looked down at Yayoi, her eyes a mixture of happiness and pity.

Ken, still carrying one end of the collection box, was listening to their conversation, prepared to answer Midori quickly if she asked him a question, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

And as they set the box down on the wooden steps of the shrine, he thought, *How are we going to lift Satsuki up to the top of the old foundation?*

"Ken, you should come too," Midori said. "It's not summer without fireworks. And you might even get to see me wearing a *yukata*."

He gave her a bashful smile as he gazed over at the stone foundation across the shrine grounds.

Ken had been putting the problem off until later, but looking at the old foundation again, he realized it was a long way up to carry my body.

But he had no other choice. He couldn't think of a safer place to hide a corpse.

Having completed his duty, Ken climbed the stones of the old foundation to report to the older boys. One of the boys gave him permission to go home, adding, "Don't be late. We're not going to wait for you."

Ken took a moment to look around before going home with Yayoi. On top of the structure was a wooden board the boys used to cover up the hole and keep anyone from falling in. One of the boys shifted it aside and tossed in a candy wrapper with the words BIG KATSU written on it. I wondered if I would soon be thrown in there the same way.

Ken looked up. A wide tree branch jutted out above the stones, blocking the sunlight and keeping the top in cool shade.

*

Ken walked in the front door. His mother was lying on the floor of the living room watching TV.

"Mother, you've been saving all that string, haven't you? Where do you keep it?"

"The string? What on earth do you need string for?"

"That string on the light in our bedroom broke. I need a new one, so where is it?"

His mother, somewhat irritated at the disturbance, stood up and walked into the storage room. After a short time she returned, holding a round metal cookie tin with the word *Tyrolean* written in cursive lettering across the top. In the Tachibana household, the cookie tins of that brand were well known as Mother's sewing boxes. One time, Midori brought over a box of Tyroleans, and Yayoi took one look at it and said dejectedly, "What, another sewing box?"

"Here, you can pick one of these," said Mrs. Tachibana, proudly displaying the tin. "Just leave the box here when you're done. See, I told you these would come in handy one day."

"Yeah, one day in how many years? That's some ratio."

Ken's mother, appalled, said flatly, "You're still in fifth grade, right? And you've already learned ratios?"

"Well, I'd better take this up to our room. If I chose one without Yayoi, she'd get mad at me."

Without waiting for a reply, Ken took the tin and started walking back to his room. Judging from its weight, there must have been quite a lot of string inside. He opened it and took out a handful of the sturdy string, used at stores to bundle up purchases, that had been

sitting unused for years. As he walked, he idly played with the string in his hand, and thought.

With all this string, I should be able to lift Satsuki up somehow . . .

He would move me the next day. That would give him plenty of time to test out his rig.

Ken's grandmother and grandfather waved at him from their room. He stopped and asked what they wanted.

"Ken," said his grandfather, "the fireworks are tonight, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe we should go." He turned to his wife. "Don't you think, dear?"

That seemed to be all they wanted to ask of him, so Ken said, "Yeah, you should both come. It'll be fun," and headed for his room.

Behind him, Ken heard them talking.

"That's right," his grandmother said. "It's tonight, isn't it?"

"Yeah. We'll check on it in the morning."

"Okay, dear."

"It's always right around the fireworks show when they turn on the water. It'll take a while for it to reach our fields though."

Ken pondered the new dilemma as he walked into his room. It seemed like he wouldn't be able to relax and enjoy the fireworks this year.

Our time together was almost over. Just one more night.

*

As the world turned the color of night, Ken held Yayoi's hand and ran down the gravel road toward the field where they had left me early that morning.

The fireworks show was about to start, and there was little time left before the fields would fill with water. Once they collected my body and took it to the hole in the old foundation, it would all be over.

"Hurry, Yayoi!" Ken yelled. A black backpack hung from his back, jolting from side to side with each step. Yayoi didn't know what all was inside the bag, aside from the pieces of string tied into a decent length. The two had spent the afternoon in their room tying all of the string in the cookie tin into one long piece. The work had taken a long time—too long, perhaps—and now the kids had to rush.

The water coming into the fields and soaking me wouldn't be fatal to Ken's plan, but they did have reason to keep me from being submerged in the water.

Fireworks sounded from the shrine in the distance and burst high

above in the sky.

“Brother, it was around here. Satsuki has to be around here somewhere.”

“Yeah . . .”

Ken and Yayoi stood on the gravel road, looking in my direction. But they couldn’t remember exactly where they had left me.

The two children were holding flashlights. Yayoi had been worried about running into trouble as they had so early that morning, but Ken told her it would be fine. Even if somebody spotted them, they would just say they were on their way to see the fireworks, and nobody would doubt them.

Yayoi said to herself, distressed, “Maybe it was a little up ahead.”

Ken, appearing similarly agitated, surveyed the field. “I forgot where we left her.”

Neither one was looking my way.

Above the shrine, the sky shone in faint colors as fireworks began to spray fountains of light.

“Come on, Yayoi,” Ken said, walking into the field. “We need to go look for Satsuki.”

She followed after him.

The field was quite large, and even more so for two children. They split up and moved methodically through the area, keeping their flashlights pointed down at the ground as they pushed through the green rice.

But it wasn’t easy to find me. Several times they unknowingly walked right past my corpse.

Yayoi’s panicked voice cried out to her brother. “Ken! The water’s coming!”

Her shoes were wet and half covered with mud. The ground beneath me was still dry, but the water was spreading.

“We have to find her, Yayoi!” he called back to her. “If we start getting bogged down in the mud, it’ll only be harder!”

The night was filled with darkness, and the deep green fields were thick with rice plants fed by the summer sun, plenty tall enough to hide a child. The rice blocked Yayoi’s view and encircled her as if preventing her escape.

Between that oppressive feeling and the sensation of her feet sinking into the wet earth, the girl was terrified. With a trembling, almost wailing voice, she cried out.

“Brother!”

She sprinted to Ken to embrace him, if only to keep herself from shaking.

Water spread underneath my cold back. In minutes I would be half buried in mud.

Yayoi ran like she was fleeing from a wild beast. Deep in her heart, she felt she could see the shadow of the monster that chased her.

Ken had aimed his flashlight at her and watched her run, unsure of how to react.

The figure of his running sister rose up in the light, then promptly disappeared into the rice.

"Yayoi!" Ken screamed, sprinting to where she had vanished.

Yayoi had tripped and collapsed on the ground and now lay on a pile of rice plants she had knocked down. She was crying. Her fall had broken the last thread of resolve she had left. When Ken reached her, she clung to him fiercely, sobbing.

"There, there," Ken said, comforting her. "You did good." He pointed at the object that she had tripped on—me.

My body had twisted from the impact of her foot—not that I could offer any protest. My toes and my hair poked out from the ends of the rush mat that wrapped around me like seaweed around a piece of *sushi*.

"Come on, Yayoi, let's get Satsuki to the shrine. We can't leave her here—there might be people coming to check on the water in the fields."

Ken lifted me from the ground. Yayoi wiped the tears from her eyes and took my feet.

As I was picked up, droplets of water dripped off my back. The water had spread through most of the field, and as they walked I weighed them down and their feet sank into the mud. To the two children, it felt like hands were reaching up and grabbing their feet to prevent their escape.

Water poured into the field (now properly a paddy) and filled it completely, but the children were just paces from the road, and soon they stumbled out, almost collapsing onto the gravel. They were caked with mud and looked as if they had spent the whole day doing farm work in the field.

But the two didn't stop moving, and at last they made it to the concrete wall that ran along the shrine grounds. Since the stone foundation was far from the shrine's entrance, they decided to climb over the wall at the rear of the grounds.

Not only could they now clearly hear the sounds of the fireworks coming over the wall, they also saw the smoke and even heard the voices of the villagers who had come to watch. Hearing them made Yayoi more nervous. The more people there were, the greater the chance that they would be seen.

"All right, Yayoi," Ken said. "Once we climb over this wall, we'll be inside the shrine grounds. We'll have to run to the foundation. We have to be careful not to draw the attention of anyone who's come to

see the fireworks."

Yayoi listened intently to her brother's reminder and cautiously nodded.

Ken turned to face the concrete wall. It was just a little taller than his head, but tall enough that Yayoi wouldn't be able to reach the top.

"I'll have to lift you over the wall," Ken said, just loud enough for his sister to hear. "So you'll be going in first. I'll throw Satsuki over next, and then I'll be last in."

Yayoi meekly nodded again.

"Okay. Think of this as a raid. We have to move fast, and the hardest part will be making sure we're not seen. And when you drop down from the wall, be careful not to twist your ankle."

He lifted her up the wall.

The fireworks show was about half over. The fireworks were more elaborate than the cheaper handheld Roman candles and fountains, and some were even rockets that launched up into the sky (although still only of the size a child could buy). The children were there to provide entertainment for the people who came to worship in the shrine, and they even handed out smaller fireworks to the younger children who came with their parents. It was our village's tradition, and it kept worship of the shrine's gods alive in the hearts of our people.

Yayoi jumped down the other side of the wall, where the pungent smell of gunpowder assaulted her.

But that shock was trifling compared to what she saw. Just paces away from where she landed stood a large group of people. No, not a group—a crowd. The crowd faced the center of the shrine, where the fireworks were being set off, their backs to Yayoi. But any of them could turn around at any moment. And if they did, and they saw my corpse, what could she do?

Fighting the terror welling up in her chest, she turned to the wall and raised up on her shaking toes to tell Ken on the other side. She tried to cry out to him. *Don't come over. There are people here. Don't throw Satsuki over*.

But the words never tumbled from between her trembling lips, because when she turned it was me that came tumbling down.

As I flopped to the ground, pink and green light spilled between the people watching the fireworks, splashing vivid colors across Yayoi's back and the rush mat that covered my body.

"Brother!" she said in a harsh whisper, but neither the crowd of people nor Ken heard.

But they might have heard the sound of my body thudding on the gravel. With tears in her eyes and despair and terror on her face, Yayoi looked up at Ken as he leapt down from the wall.

He landed next to me, saw the crowd of people, and raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

"Yayoi, don't cry," he comforted her, thinking they had to get moving before anyone noticed them. But someone already had.

"If it isn't Ken and Yayoi," a woman in the crowd said, looking right at them. Yayoi stiffened, clutching at her brother's arm.

The woman was backlit by the fireworks, and they couldn't see her face in the darkness, but the two children immediately recognized her voice. Squinting at her, they could see a tinge of sadness in her expression.

"Hello, ma'am," Ken greeted my mother. His voice had sympathy in it, but I knew it was an act. Ken hadn't given up yet. "Where's Satsuki?" he asked. "Isn't she coming to see the fireworks? Hasn't anyone found her yet?"

She shook her head mournfully. She looked like she would lose her composure and break down at any moment. She had come to the fireworks festival to relive the memory of her only daughter. The memories were all she had left.

My mother and I came to the fireworks show every summer. I'd watch the show with Ken and Yayoi, and we'd even set off some of our own. Even now, the memories were too much for me.

And there I was, with Ken and Yayoi at the fireworks again.

Ken spoke hesitantly, choosing his words carefully. "I . . . hope you find her soon."

My disappearance hadn't been on the news yet. The police, having been unable to find me anywhere, had just begun to treat my case as a kidnapping. The next day, the media would be all over the town.

"Thank you, Ken," my mother said. "You know, when I watch these fireworks, I can't help but think of her. It feels like she's right here next to me."

Yayoi tightened her grip on Ken's arm. She started to tremble. I was lying on the ground right behind her. Even with the faint light of the fireworks, it must have still been too dark for her to notice me. But Yayoi was becoming so nervous that she couldn't think straight. How much longer until my mother saw me?

"You'll find her, I'm sure of it," Ken said with an innocent smile. "So cheer up." It was a perfect smile, and for a minute I thought it would be enough to convince my mother that she would find me, or that maybe I'd walk right through the front door the next day.

She looked at Ken for a moment, with no words left to say, only tears spilling out the corners of her eyes. No one else in the crowd seemed to have noticed us. They were watching the fireworks bursting above the shrine, oohing and ahhing in appreciation.

"Thank you . . ." my mother managed, bathed in the colored light.

Her eyes shone with gratitude. “Thank you, Ken.”

Yayoi looked like she was about to cry too. Was she remembering all the times we played together, all the summers we came to the shrine to watch the fireworks? Had she realized the vastness of her sin?

Ken was only waiting for a chance to break away and deliver me to the stone foundation.

“There, there,” he tried. “Don’t cry. Crying won’t bring her back. Hey, look, they’re about to start the finale.”

Ken pointed over to where the fireworks were being lit. One of the older boys from the village was setting a large tube down upon the ground. It had cost a few hundred yen—fairly pricey compared to the rest. The crowd’s attention was focused on it as they waited expectantly.

“You’re right,” she said, looking over at the center of the shrine. “I shouldn’t be crying.”

The village boy stood a few steps away from the firework tube, and slowly, carefully, stretched out his arm to light the fuse.

That was the chance Ken was waiting for.

Without missing a beat, he shook his arm free from his sister’s grip and lifted my head from the ground. He whispered at Yayoi to lift up my feet. They stood at each end, blocking my hair and my toes from view.

“Well, we’d better get going,” Ken said to my mother. If he had left without saying anything, it would have been suspicious. Yayoi was completely focused on hiding my toes.

“All right. Thank you, Ken.” She turned to look at them and showed a little surprise at seeing the oddly shaped rush mat tube in their hands. “By the way, what are you two carrying?”

Since the children were standing at each end, she could only see the ambiguously lumpy midsection. She couldn’t have known that I was inside.

Ken’s reply was quick. “Fireworks. The older boys sent us to get them.”

My mother either believed the lie or was not interested enough to press it.

“Well,” Ken said, “goodbye. Don’t give up hope. Yayoi, let’s go.”

They started walking toward the old foundation, careful not to let any part of my body show out the ends. Yayoi walked stiffly as she tried to fight off panic.

It was a losing battle. Soon her grip loosened, and I tumbled out of her hands.

Ken was still holding my head, and I arced downward. My feet slammed against the ground and I slipped further out of the matting.

Now not only were my toes showing, but my feet—all the way up to the ankles—as well.

Yayoi gasped and Ken turned back to face her.

“Quickly, hide it, Yayoi!”

They might not have been seen yet. By the time her brother had given the instruction, Yayoi had already begun to hurriedly stuff my feet back into the matting. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Ken looked back at my mother. She was walking toward them and called out, “Hey, Ken!”

Had she seen? The two children tensed and looked at her like two defendants awaiting a death sentence.

“Hey, Ken,” she repeated. “Satsuki liked you. Did you know that?”

Relief filled Yayoi’s face. My mother hadn’t seen me. She had still been watching the fireworks.

Ken’s expression softened a little. “Yeah, I knew.”

My mother sobbed a few more times and said goodbye. Ken and Yayoi resumed their walk to the old foundation even more cautiously than before.

All Ken had to do was get my body to the top of the stone foundation and toss it down the hole, and the game would be won. He could see victory right in front of him.

The fireworks show was nearing its climax, with the majority of the fireworks now the more expensive kind. The boys, not eager to be so quickly parted from their haul, tended to save the most expensive ones for the end.

A particularly large tube of fireworks ignited, and a fountain of grain-sized spots of light burst forth. The shrine grounds, from the stone foundation to the wooden shrine itself, were illuminated by the dreamlike light, glittering in brilliant silver and gold. Many of the spectators would doubtlessly remember it for the rest of their lives. With time, the memory would only grow brighter, forever radiant.

Finally, Ken and Yayoi stood at the base of the stone foundation. Had it not been for my mother’s interruptions, they would have reached their destination sooner.

Looking up from the base of the structure, it seemed to tower high enough to touch the stars above. Clearly, they weren’t going to be able to just carry me to the top.

They were out of the view of the spectators, and out of the reach of the light. But there was still a chance that someone would happen by.

They set my body down on the ground, and Yayoi asked her brother in a wavering voice, “What do we do now, Brother?”

“I need you to listen carefully. We’re going to lift her to the top of the foundation. There’s a few things we need to do and I’ll explain them in order.”

Yayoi nodded, and Ken went over the plan in simple terms.

From his backpack, he removed the string they had spent the afternoon tying together and passed it under the cord that was holding the rush mat closed around me. Ken would climb up to the top of the foundation holding both ends of the string in his hands. Then, using the string, he'd lift up my body, which would still be resting on the ground.

"Okay, I'm going to climb up there now. You stay down here and keep lookout."

Ken slung his backpack over his shoulder and found a foothold in the dry stone wall. Holding the string in his hands, he adeptly worked his way up the side of the foundation. Any of the boys in the village would have no trouble climbing it—it was their secret hideout, after all.

The rocks that formed the wall were just larger than a human head and were stacked about as high as the roof of the shrine's storeroom. Patches of moss grew on the surface of the old stones. Below, Yayoi paced as she watched her brother climb. Her attention was focused above her, and she stumbled on a tree root that protruded across her path. She regained her balance and chastised herself for forgetting her brother's instructions to stand watch.

The rear of the old foundation, out of the reach of the fireworks' light, was enshrouded in foreboding gloom.

Ken reached the top of the wall and raised himself up to the stone platform. The foundation was deserted, its rocks cold to the touch. He could see across the entire grounds. The fireworks sparkled brilliantly above.

Ken tugged at the string in his hands, making sure it was still secure around me. He set down his backpack, and from inside it he removed two objects.

The first was one of the U-shaped iron gateball gates, and the second an unused pulley made for the storehouse door. He must have sneaked them out of the storehouse before saying goodbye to the old men.

Ken placed one side of the gate's U through the hole in the side of the pulley, and hung the other side over a thick branch of the tree that protruded over the top of the foundation.

He threaded the string over the top of the pulley's wheel. The plan was to hold the end of the string and jump down from the top of the foundation wall. He'd slide down, and I'd be pulled up.

And then I'd be tossed down that hole, and that would be that.

Below, Yayoi watched my mother intently, worried that their crimes would be revealed if she came back and noticed me.

Just as Ken had finished his preparations and was ready to jump

down, a voice called out from behind Yayoi's back.

"Oh, if it isn't the Tachibana kids. What are you two doing over here?"

Yayoi spun to face the voice. Ken had heard it too.

Old Man Thunder and Mr. Kobayashi were passing by, looking up at Ken with puzzled expressions. If they had been looking down and not up, they would have already seen me wrapped in the rush mat.

After a moment, Ken found his voice. "Good evening."

He was holding the string in his hands, still poised to leap. He looked completely ridiculous.

But the old men kept walking past. It wasn't that unusual to see kids playing on the old foundation, and it wasn't like they had anything in particular to talk about anyway. Yayoi silently prayed that nothing would happen.

"Careful up there, Ken," Old Man Thunder said. "Some kid got hurt up there just this year, you know."

They kept walking toward the crowd and the fireworks.

Yayoi's heart cheered.

And that was when it happened.

"Oof! What's this now?"

Kobayashi tripped over my body and stumbled.

Yayoi's body went stiff, a shriek escaping through her mouth but not finding voice.

Ken watched from above.

Kobayashi eyed the object that had tripped him. "What on earth is this? And what's it doing here of all places?"

There was little light behind the foundation, and I lay half in shadow. He couldn't quite make out what I was. But it was only a matter of time—moments, even—until he would.

Yayoi wanted to run. She wanted to run more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. But without Ken, where could she run? And who could she run to, if not Ken?

Mr. Kobayashi started feeling out with his hands.

"Hm? Is this . . . rush matting?"

Just a few more seconds and he'd surely see my body poking out from the end of the mat.

Yayoi shook uncontrollably, about to collapse into tears.

But Ken called down from the foundation.

"Hey, you two guys had better hurry. They're about to light the fireworks waterfall!"

"Really?" Kobayashi withdrew his arm. "Tanaka, let's go. The kids put in a lot of work for that one."

The two old men looked over at the fireworks.

Ken moved quickly. The instant they turned their gaze over to the

show, he leapt down from the foundation with the string wrapped around his hands. Pulled by his weight, I rose silently up into the air. The thin string strained, threatening to snap at any moment. The gate, balanced precariously over the tree branch, was barely able to stay in place under the weight of two children.

The pulley jolted with the passing of each knot in the string, jiggling the tree limb and shaking loose its green summer leaves one by one.

"Well, we'll be off, then," said Old Man Thunder. "Careful not to hurt yourself, Ken."

When the two men turned back to say their goodbyes, Ken had already landed on the ground, still holding the string in his hands, pulling on it to keep me from lowering.

"When did you get down here?" Mr. Kobayashi asked, tilting his head to the side. "And where did that bundle of rush matting go to? Someone could trip on that and hurt themselves, you know."

Yayoi watched the exchange unable even to breathe.

Ken answered, "Don't worry, I'll find it. And when I do, I'll take care of it." His words sounded like a bad joke. I remembered that he had made a similar joke when Midori had almost discovered me. I would have laughed were I able.

Ken smiled a genuine smile at the old men, and they were deceived by it just like all the others had been.

"Thanks, kid," said Kobayashi.

And just as the two men were about to leave, the string that was suspending me in the air began to creak. I was only nine years old, and my body couldn't have weighed much, but the string, unable to bear it any longer, was crying out.

And then, the cord that had once hung down from the children's bedroom light snapped without a sound.

I fell through the air and landed with a thud. The rush mat dangled above me, half open.

"What was that?" Kobayashi looked up to the source of the noise.

I had landed on top of the old foundation, only inches from the edge. Only inches from a longer fall down to the earth. Only inches from being seen.

"It was nothing," Ken said. "I'll take care of it. If you don't hurry, you're going to miss the waterfall."

Ken immediately understood what had happened when he felt the tension of my weight on the string disappear. But the realization didn't register on his face. Yayoi exhaled and thanked God for hearing her prayers.

"You're right," Kobayashi said. "Tanaka, let's go."

They went.

Yayoi stood, watching them leave. When the two men had passed around the edge of the foundation, she let out a sigh of relief.

"That was close, Brother!" It couldn't have been any closer.

Ken looked down at his sister, who was once again her normal, cheerful self, and smiled. "Yeah, it was."

It's over, Yayoi thought to herself, allowing her smile to spread wide across her face. *Once we climb to the top, there will be no one to stop us. I won't have to live in fear any longer. And I can say goodbye to Satsuki and keep only the happy memories of when we were friends.*

"Come on, Yayoi," Ken said brightly, "climb on up here. All we have to do is throw Satsuki into the hole. Don't you want to say goodbye to her?"

Yayoi nodded back to him energetically and climbed up the wall. Ken pointed out the path to her as she went, just as he had done the time he showed her how to scale that tree.

And for the first time, Yayoi stood atop the stone foundation, Ken by her side. From there, they had a perfect view of the fireworks show. The Niagara Falls had just been lit.

The fireworks, strung together and hanging from a string, burst into light, red and blue and green and pink, and all the millions of colors in between. The streams of color ran together, creating a waterfall of sparks that shone in their eyes. It was an impressive display coming from a group of kids. The spectators, dazzled by the show, would remember it for the rest of their lives.

"Why . . ." Ken whispered regretfully, mournfully, "why are you here?"

Waves of pain swept across his face, his expression shouting as loud as his voice had been soft. *You, of anyone. The last person I'd want to see here.*

"Didn't I tell you not to be late? I've been waiting here all night. I even wore my yukata for you."

As she fanned herself with a paper fan, Midori chuckled.

Midori sat watching the fireworks from the edge of the foundation, cradling the rush mat bundle, myself wrapped inside, in her arms. Her deep red lipstick shone in the darkness of the summer night.

Lit by the waterfall of fireworks, perhaps half over yet still bright, Midori smiled a smile so beautiful and seductive it was almost inhuman.

Ken and Yayoi stood dumbstruck, staring at Midori.

"Ever since I was a little kid," she said, "I've always wanted to watch the fireworks from up here."

His voice wracked with pain, Ken said, "Midori, give that to me."

She gave the boy a glance and returned her gaze to the fireworks. "I know what you're doing. You're thinking that you're going to dump

Satsuki down that hole, aren't you?"

She watched the light of the fireworks as it colored the summer night. Her eyes squinted in the light, and memories of her childhood filled her thoughts.

Somehow, thanks to my deceased state, I became aware that she had suffered a tough childhood. Her father had passed away when she was young, and her mother bullied her. Underneath her smile lay years of pain and torment.

She began to unwrap the rush mat in her arms. The string tying it together had broken, and the mat was half open. My face would be visible once she had lifted the lower flap.

"No!" Ken screamed. "You can't! Don't open it, Midori!" Beside him, Yayoi was bawling.

But Midori's hand gently spread the rush mat open, consolingly, and as if she were showing the fireworks to me.

And as the rush mat spread out across the stone surface of the foundation, my face seemed to look up at her.

Midori gazed into my face, already tinged with rot and discoloration. My eyes, open from the moment I died, took in the light of the moon and the stars.

Midori gently closed my eyelids and whispered, "It's over now," to me, and to Ken.

The cascade of fireworks stretching up into the sky were reaching their conclusion as well, and suddenly, like the end of a fleeting and vibrant life, the last light scattered into the night, to linger on only in the hearts of those who had witnessed it.

And as if on cue, darkness spread its wings across us.
Beneath the dark, starlit night, Ken and Yayoi heard the far-off crackling sound of decay, and then, the sweet song of Midori's laughter reaching out to them.

Kagome, Kagome

The rice in the fields was painted with yellow and ripe for harvest, and the old stone foundation at the shrine was being demolished.

Around the dry stone structure were several bulldozers accompanied by busy men in construction vests.

"Hey, come check this out," one of them said. "There's something over here." He was pointing at the foundation, which sat sliced open like a cake. Along the edge was a single vertical fissure shaped like a well.

"What the hell?" another responded, agape. "Look at all that garbage!"

At the bottom of the well was a human-sized pile of trash. The garbage had accumulated and congealed together as if part of the foundation from its construction.

But near the top of the pile, some of the garbage, mostly plastic bags and candy wrappers, had not yet decomposed.

“Look, there’s even some spinning tops, and what are these, Pogs? What a waste!”

The toys were bundled up in a plastic bag. Perhaps they had been accidentally dropped down the hole, or perhaps someone had thrown them away to say goodbye to his childhood.

A little farther down was a large pile of papers, some written on with brush and ink, some yellowed with age, some so damaged by rainwater as to leave their original form indiscernible. It was as if all the memories of childhood had fused over the lifetimes into a single object.

And then, one of the workers saw something odd.

“Hey, look . . .”

It was a clump of hair. And judging from the length of it, it seemed to him as if someone had thrown a young girl into the hole.

The worker cautiously pulled at the hair.

The hair slipped easily from the pile of garbage, and from beneath it the rotted face and body of a child slid out onto the ground at their feet.

The man gave a frightened shriek and slumped down on his knees.

One of the others laughed at him. “Thank God it’s not the real thing, ’cause who knows what you would have done then!”

What had appeared from the pile was a life-size Japanese doll. Before it had been thrown away, it must have been very beautiful. Even though it had been rotting in the garbage pile for years, just looking at it, you could still tell it had once been a girl doll.

The two construction workers, standing at what was to have been my grave, roared with laughter over the events of that peaceful autumn day.

*

“See, aren’t you glad you listened to me?”

Midori and Yayoi sat on either side of Ken, three abreast on the shrine’s wooden steps as they watched the workers demolish the stone foundation. The three of them reminded me of how we used to sit on the branch of our secret tree.

The tree leaves that had protected the shrine from the harsh rays of the summer sun had turned to shades of yellow and were drifting

down one by one to the ground. The stone pavement that stretched out before the three was covered in browns and yellows.

"We are glad," said Ken. "If we hadn't, there'd have been a lot of trouble right about now."

Midori, happy to hear his words, broke into a smile.

"That's right. Never underestimate the resources of a nineteen-year-old! There's been talk of tearing down that foundation and building a community center in its place for a long time. Of course, some people wanted it preserved because the foundation was all that survived when the castle burnt down in the war. But you heard about the kid who hurt himself up there earlier this year, right? Well, when that happened, they decided to move forward with the demolition. Adults are selfish creatures, aren't they? Destroying the places we like to play and then turning around and complaining about how 'kids these days never go outside anymore.'"

She affectionately looked down at Ken sitting next to her. *Another five years, maybe six*, she thought, *and he'll be about my height*.

With admiration in his voice, Ken said, "Really, Midori, you saved us. When I first saw you up there, I didn't know what to do. I never thought you'd come to help us deal with Satsuki."

He gazed up at her with eyes full of respect, and she looked right back at him. She was happy.

"It's all taken care of. Getting rid of bodies like that is something I'm quite used to by now. And don't worry, I won't turn you in to the police or anyone else. Your secret is safe with me."

Midori's red lips formed a smile, and she gently traced her finger along Ken's cheek, her red-painted nail sliding sensually down the curve of it.

Then, as if awaiting his next words, she looked into his eyes.

"You're really something," he said brightly.

Midori pulled him into her arms, thankful for and delighted by his admiration. She held him tightly, pressing his face against her chest so firmly that he couldn't even breathe.

She felt his body turn warm, and thought, *Maybe now I can finally stop . . .*

Yayoi listened to them talk, her eyes pressed shut. She would never have to say that she had murdered me. If she kept on lying, saying that I had only fallen from that tree, no one would ever doubt her innocence. She hadn't been able to tell her parents that lie because she had felt guilty and afraid. She had been worried that she would get caught.

The autumn wind blew through the temple grounds. It was cold, and winter would come soon. As the wind swept through, yellow and brown leaves shook free of the trees and drifted down upon the three

sitting on the steps.

As she tenderly plucked the dead leaves from Ken's hair, Midori smiled like an angel. She recalled all of her dreadful past sins and felt aware of the boyish demon sleeping somewhere in the bottom of her soul.

Was that hole the result of shoddy workmanship of the builders of old? The stone structure, once the foundation for a great castle, was no more. Another era had passed.

The memories of the children that rested within the foundation over all the generations were carried away in the autumn wind, vanishing like a fleeting summer dream.

Sitting on the wooden steps before the sacred shrine, above where my sandal still lay hidden, the three sinners smiled at the future that awaited them and the childhood they had left behind.

CODA:

Midori brought me to this cold place.

She took me to the back corner of a refrigerated storage room in the ice cream factory where nobody but her ever sets foot.

It's a place with no seasons, only winter all year long. If a living person were in here, they would freeze to death within the day.

But I'm not lonely at all.

In fact, since I came here, I've made all sorts of friends.

They're all boys, and their faces all look like Ken's. They even play "Kagome, Kagome" with me.

Their faces might all be a pale blue, but we can still have lots of fun.

Me and my kidnapped friends sing "Kagome, Kagome," and the song echoes hollow and forlorn through the room.

Yuko

That day, when Masayoshi arrived at the gate to his home, the first thing he saw was Yuko wrapped in flame. He ran to her screaming and put out the fire, but it was already too late.

Weeping, he cried out, *I'm sorry. I'm sorry*. His heart was too full of guilt to experience the sadness of losing her.

He was thinking of a story that his mother had told him long before.

The story of a mother and child who came to Torigoe Manor many generations ago.

The story of a flower the child had been holding in her hand.

Clutching his Yuko to his chest, Masayoshi looked up at the sky and saw no moon.

1. KIYONE

It was soon after the Second World War had ended.

Kiyone had been at Torigoe Manor two weeks, and she was starting to become familiar with the layout of the house and the specifics of her duties. And though it was the first time in her life she had worked, she hadn't found it particularly difficult or painful. Rather, Kiyone felt gratitude toward the master of the house for giving a woman like her a place to work.

She stood by an old gate in a corner of the house's spacious garden, thinking. *What should I make for dinner tonight? I wonder what kind of food the master likes to eat?* Beside the gate grew a few lonely hydrangea bushes and a shrub with round, pitchblack berries.

It was the summer rainy season, and clouds hung above, threatening rain. Kiyone was admiring the hydrangeas when the pleasant *clop clop* of wooden shoes came to her from outside the gate. She looked down the narrow stone path that continued beyond the gate—it seemed like it would be crushed by the bamboo trees along its length—and saw the master of the house walking toward her. *Clop clop*. His footsteps echoed down the path to her, and as he approached he looked at Kiyone with gentle eyes.

When he passed through the gate, she politely bowed her head and greeted him. "Welcome home, sir."

"Thank you, Kiyone. It's good to see you."

He stopped next to Kiyone, his gaze lingering on the hydrangeas behind her. “The hydrangeas are in bloom. Is it that time of year already?”

He crossed his arms, slipping them within the opposite sleeves of his kimono, and smiled. For a moment, Kiyone was transfixed by his youthful face.

Every time she saw it she thought, *He looks so feminine. If he grew out his hair and put on lipstick, he might be as fetching as a China doll.*

His name was Masayoshi. He was a writer, and Kiyone couldn’t help but think what a shame it was for his white and slender fingers to be so calloused from his fountain pens. Masayoshi was a friend of her father’s.

Masayoshi turned his eyes to her and asked, “Have you grown accustomed to your duties? You’re still young. It must be tough for you to manage the house all by yourself.”

It wasn’t. She was filled with gratitude but couldn’t find the proper words to express it. All she managed in response was an awkward smile. With only one exception, she loved being at Torigoe Manor.

Just then, Kiyone noticed that Masayoshi was not carrying the thick brown envelope he had left with, and she realized that he must have gone to the village’s only post office.

“If you’d told me,” she said, “I could have gone to the post office for you.”

“No, it was nothing. I have to get out of that room every now and then, you know.”

“Oh. Is it really all right that I don’t ever clean your room?”

“Yes, it’s fine. Yuko can do the cleaning for that one room.”

Kiyone gave a start when she heard the name, just as she did every time she heard it.

“Ummm, is the lady feeling well?”

She could see his face cloud over. *Just like the sky today*, Kiyone thought.

“No, she’s not well and may not be for a while yet . . .”

But Kiyone didn’t hear the ring of truth in the master’s remark. It had been two weeks since she came to Torigoe Manor, and she had yet to see his wife’s face. All Kiyone knew was that she was nearly bedridden in Masayoshi’s room. I wonder what kind of woman his wife is, she thought to herself whenever Yuko’s name escaped his lips.

“The hydrangeas,” Masayoshi said, walking over to the fl owers.

The smell of his clothing wafted toward Kiyone as he passed.

“Those aren’t the petals of the hydrangea. Did you know that?”

He pointed a finger at a pale blue hydrangea. “These blue parts here that look like petals—they’re actually sepals. They’re only imitating the real petals.”

Kiyone's heart began to race, although she didn't know why.

"Hydrangeas seem to sparkle in the rain." Masayoshi noticed the black berries growing next to the hydrangeas and tilted his head. "Now what on earth is this plant with the black berries?"

He bent over, putting his nose to the berries. For some reason, seeing his odd pose gave Kiyone a sense of relief.

Berries, pitch black and glossy, about the size of the tip of a little finger, dotted the bush.

"What a pretty black color they have," Masayoshi said and then walked to the house, the clop clop of his wooden shoes echoing through the garden.

Kiyone took a deep breath. Her lungs filled with heavy air that smelled of a forest just before the rain, and she coughed.

She looked over to where Masayoshi had walked. Torigoe Manor stood outstretched like unfurled wings. She couldn't believe that she worked in such a large house. She had never before seen a gravel garden or stone paths and stepping-stones like those that led all the way from the gate to the front door.

Kiyone stood there, thinking of a woman named Yuko whom she had not yet seen.

*

Masayoshi always took his meals in his room with Yuko. For each meal, Kiyone set two servings on a tray and carried it to their room through a dim hallway with windowless earthen walls set with flanking rows of sliding paper doors. The black floorboards were old and worn smooth and complained beneath her footsteps, *creak creak*.

That was probably how Masayoshi could always tell when Kiyone had come with their meals. Before she could speak up and inform him that she had arrived with their food, he would say from behind the sliding door, "Thank you, just leave the tray there, please."

She set the tray down in front of the doorway and left. She had never seen into his room.

The master and his wife are such odd people, Kiyone thought. Masayoshi and Yuko went to great lengths not to open the door in her presence, and it gnawed at her curiosity. Thinking of how intently they listened for the *creak creak* of the floorboards sent shivers down her spine. Many times since she came to Torigoe Manor she had the creeping feeling of a dreadful gaze watching her from the shadows pooled at the ends of the long corridors in the mansion. She walked quickly past the demonic masks of *hannya* and *tengu* that hung from the walls. Their expressions seemed to change whenever she glanced

back at them.

*

One day, soon after Kiyone had begun to work at Torigoe Manor, she was walking down the hallway to Masayoshi and Yuko's room to retrieve the tray with their dishes. When the two had finished eating, they always left the tray in the hallway in front of their room, exactly in the same spot Kiyone had set it, and she would pick it up without a word and bring it back to the kitchen.

On this day, Kiyone had prepared a side dish of *tempura* along with their meal. When she was a child, her father had once taken her out to eat tempura, but she hadn't had it since. Now, she had been nervous trying to cook it all by herself.

Is this all right? Does it really taste like actual tempura tastes? Kiyone had spent some time looking at the tempura, comparing it with the image in her memory.

Kiyone always went to a house in the neighboring village to buy the vegetables, and she often asked for advice on how to cook. She had followed the instructions to make the tempura, but she had no way of knowing if she had done so correctly or not. And when she saw the tray on the floor of the hallway with half the food uneaten, she felt deeply abashed.

Kiyone picked up the tray and stood in front of the door to their room, unsure of what to do. *Should I say something? Should I ask what was wrong with my tempura?*

Masayoshi's kind voice came from inside the room. *It feels so awkward to have a conversation through the closed paper door*, she thought.

"Kiyone, do you have a minute?

Here it comes, she thought.

"From tomorrow," he went on, "could you only make half the food for Yuko and me?"

Why only half? Is my cooking that unbearable? Do they not even want to eat it anymore?

"We're both light eaters. Because neither one of us moves around much, you see. So starting tomorrow, we'd like you to cut our servings in half."

"Um . . ." Kiyone fearfully began. "Um . . . is it because of my cooking? If that's the case, I'd be happier if you just told me so."

She heard Masayoshi's pleasant laughter from behind the paper door. "Your tempura really was delicious."

Kiyone felt her cheeks quickly warm, and she hurriedly left. Not

until she lay alone tossing in bed that night did she realize that she had heard Masayoshi laugh, but not Yuko.

*

The house's pantry was just off the kitchen. Among the objects that sat on its white dried-earth floor were several cardboard boxes and a dust-covered stove. The strong, stale odor of wet straw filled the room.

Kiyone kept potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables bought from the next village in the boxes, but one day, she looked inside only to find them empty.

What should I do? I can't make lunch like this. Kiyone methodically went through the boxes one by one. The cardboard had softened in the humidity, but the dirt clinging to the sides had long dried. As her hands moved through the boxes, her fingers started to turn white with the dry mud and began to grow cold.

Each box she opened was empty, and soon it seemed that none would contain any ingredients at all. *What should I do?* Kiyone cursed her carelessness. *Why didn't I notice that we were running out of food earlier?*

But Kiyone kept searching. She lowered her head to the dusty earthen floor in search of anything she could cook, and behind the legs of the stove she spotted a single cardboard box.

Kiyone let out a sigh of relief and pushed the stove aside to get at the box. The stove was heavy, and as she lifted it she could feel the kerosene sloshing around inside.

Inside the box were a few old, yellowed daikon radishes and onions, maybe just enough for Masayoshi and Yuko's meal.

But not enough for me, Kiyone thought. Well, I can just make do with some berries or something.

Kiyone looked up and saw a row of crates lining a shelf high on one of the storeroom walls. The word DOLLS was written in *kanji* across the rough wood of the crates. Both the writing and the wood itself looked quite old.

She was drawn in by the word dolls. Kiyone had never learned how to read kanji, but her father had been a dollmaker, and she remembered the meaning of those characters.

Do all those crates contain dolls? If they do, that's certainly a lot of dolls. Maybe some of them are my father's handiwork.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Kiyone stretched her arms up and carefully pulled down one of the crates from the shelf. She was surprised by its lightness, and when she set it down and opened the lid, she discovered the reason.

It was empty. She opened all the other crates, and they were all empty. Among the many crates, there wasn't a single doll.

*

That afternoon, Kiyone decided to go to the neighboring village to restock the vegetables. When she informed Masayoshi, he gave her a generous amount of money and said, "I don't have a car, but there is a cart in the shed you can use. Will you be fine going by yourself? If it's too heavy, please have someone there help you bring it back."

Kiyone thanked him, said she'd be fine, and left. The cart, even though empty, took a considerable amount of strength to pull, but once she got it rolling, it moved along without needing much further effort.

She pulled the cart through the gate of Torigoe Manor and along the narrow stone path that cut through the bamboo grove.

I don't understand why he sends me all the way to the next village to buy the groceries. Why does he want me to avoid doing the shopping in our own village?

As she thought about it, Kiyone noticed that the neighbors she passed on the street were watching her with rigid gazes. As she pulled the cart along, she attempted to greet some of the villagers, but they only looked away, as if to them she were nothing but a nuisance.

Between the two villages, an expanse of rice paddies stretched as far as she could see. Kiyone pulled the rattling cart down the long, straight road that led to the neighboring community and to the home of a family who occasionally helped out the Torigoe household. Kiyone loved to visit there. They sold her vegetables, carefully and meticulously taught her how to cook, and treated her with warmth and kindness—like she was a person.

Beneath the clear sky, uncommonly cloudless for the rainy season, Kiyone was pulling the cart down the gravel road when she noticed a three-wheeled truck driving toward her from the next village. The road was narrow enough to make passing difficult for the cart and the truck, and the driver pulled his vehicle to the side of the road in front of her and waited for her to pass.

Kiyone thanked the driver and sped up to get out of his way as quickly as she could, and as she passed, he called out to her.

"Hey, you wouldn't happen to be running errands for Torigoe Manor, would you?"

"Yes, I am."

The driver scratched his chin in thought, then said, "Well, good luck."

His words were brusque, but there was some warmth behind them. Kiyone got the impression that he was from the neighboring village and knew exactly why she had to go all the way there to do her errands.

Next to the road, a harvested wheat field fell into shadow. Kiyone looked up and saw a single cloud fl oating across the sky, hiding the sun.

2. THE ROOM

Masayoshi sat on a legless chair in one corner of his spacious ten-mat room, his fountain pen gliding across sheets of paper.

In another corner of the room stood an old three-panel dressing mirror. The left and right panels were tied closed with red string wrapped clockwise around the handles to keep the doors from falling open. Along the opposite wall, a large number of dolls were lined up on display, almost all of them Japanese dolls with long smooth hair and white, expressionless faces all aimed at the center of the room. Anyone who entered the room would be encircled by the dolls and surrounded by the blank faces of the nameless children.

A futon was spread out on the straw *tatami* flooring in front of the rows of dolls.

Masayoshi's hand paused, and he looked over at the futon, where he saw the figure of the woman he called Yuko.

Yuko was lying in the futon, staring in Masayoshi's direction.

Her voice, thin and soft, barely discernible, came to his ear, and he could hear every word. *I caught a glimpse of Kiyone's face, dear*.

"She's an intelligent young lady."

Yes, I just saw her through the crack of the door as she walked by. She's young. I hope the work isn't too tough for her.

Masayoshi stood, went to the side of his resting wife, and gently placed his hand on top of her comforter.

When she was gone, I went to the kitchen and found a piece of paper with recipes on it. But it was written entirely in simple hiragana*—no kanji.*

"Yes, she never went to school, and she never learned how to write kanji."

Still, that's quite a feat, learning hiragana on her own.

To Masayoshi, Yuko's voice sounded dim, precarious, as though it might vanish altogether.

"I hired her because I felt sorry for her, left all alone when her father died of tuberculosis. But I'm lucky to have her here. By the way, did I ever tell you that she brought one of her father's dolls when she came here? It was a little girl doll."

Masayoshi gently brushed three fingers down the curve of her smooth, white cheek, and he thought he saw a faint smile touch the cold colors of her inanimate face.

*

Masayoshi was troubled by Yuko's occasional catatonic spells. She would stare off at nothing in particular and seem oblivious to his attempts to talk to her. He felt it was as though she were in another world, and it worried him greatly.

Usually, Masayoshi and Yuko knew that Kiyone had brought their meals when her footsteps came *creak creak creaking* along the hallway. Masayoshi would thank the young woman and listen for her to walk away down the hall before he slid open the paper door to take the tray into their room.

But when Yuko was having one of her spells, silently sitting on her futon, she made no response and showed no recognition. Even when he placed chopsticks in her delicate fingers, she made no attempt to eat.

One such time, Masayoshi became so frightened that he cried out, "Yuko! Yuko!" He shook her slender shoulders, and her long smooth hair waved violently in the air.

What's wrong, dear?

Masayoshi was relieved by the sound of her voice, and when he looked at her face he saw it filled with affection. He always felt as if her face, its features so perfectly assembled as to appear otherworldly and the purest white skin, would swallow him whole.

What's wrong, dear?

3. THE OPENING

The garden at Torigoe Manor, dotted with aptly placed stone lanterns and large, well-shaped rocks, was as expansive as the grounds of a shrine. A fence of roughly bound bamboo encircled the garden. Outside the fence grew a bamboo grove, and Kiyone often listened to the rustling of the trees when the wind blew through them. In the evening, the setting sun painted the sky behind the trees a vibrant orange, and the bamboo loomed large and black. When the bamboo bent in the breeze, they seemed like some far-off howling beast.

I wonder what path this is.

Kiyone was walking around the back of the house where she

usually never went when she noticed a narrow path snaking through the bamboo grove. She had been about to start preparing dinner.

What is it?

Kiyone tilted her head, peering into the bamboo. The path wound through the trees, and she couldn't tell where it led. But the young woman still had work to do, so she went back into the house to start peeling sweet potatoes with thoughts of the path lingering in her mind.

The next day, Kiyone walked down the path. On either side the bamboo trees stretched straight up into the cloudy gray sky. When Kiyone looked up, the trees converged at a single point above her and seemed to enclose her on all sides.

Tall, wild grass grew on either side of the path, and the long blades brushed against Kiyone's nose as she walked. The path continued unbroken through the grove. At the end of the path was a single grave.

It was a fine grave, not just a lone marker left among the trees but a tombstone that stood upon an arrangement of large rocks. A name was engraved on the stone.

It didn't look to be that old.

Kiyone approached the grave. A snake was winding its way through the small gap between the tombstone and the bamboo.

Whose grave is this? I can't read this kanji.

A flower placed on the grave had long since turned black, and a bamboo sprout left in offering lay rotting beside it.

*

As Kiyone returned to the garden, a gentle rain began to patter on her head.

Oh no, I need to bring in the laundry. Kiyone ran lightly over to where she had left the laundry out to dry.

A faded bamboo drying rack was suspended by a string from the roof next to the kitchen door, and a line of laundry hung along the rack.

Kiyone swiftly pulled off an armful of the clothes and carried it into the house, then repeated the process once more. There had been constant showers lately, and Kiyone had taken to hanging out the laundry even on cloudy days in a fruitless attempt to dry them.

As she brought in the second armload of laundry, she noticed that the outside door to Masayoshi and Yuko's room had been left open a crack.

Once all the laundry had been brought inside, Kiyone felt relieved.

But the image of that opening in the sliding door lingered in her mind. It had been one month since she had come to stay at the manor, and yet she had not once seen the inside of their room. And not only that, she had not had a single glimpse of Yuko. From time to time, Kiyone had washed Yuko's white pajamas, but they had been nearly pristine —so clean that she doubted they had been worn at all.

She found it difficult to believe that a woman named Yuko even lived in the house.

She's bedridden, so of course her clothing wouldn't get dirty so easily. That's why the laundry is always so clean. Kiyone tried to dismiss it at that, but she couldn't help but think it peculiar that she hadn't met Yuko even once.

Masayoshi's wife must be beautiful, Kiyone thought. *Because she's his wife*.

Because she's a wife.

Kiyone couldn't stand it any longer. She put on her sandals and went outside.

The air was hazy with misting rain.

She looked over at Masayoshi and Yuko's room. The door was still open a crack, but she couldn't see inside.

With steady, controlled breaths and careful footsteps, she walked toward the door.

I'll just pass right by it, like nothing's unusual.

The closer she got to the door, the faster her heart raced. A narrow wooden porch ran along the outside of their room, and below the walkway was a long, fl at stone. Atop the stone, a thin layer of water had pooled around a single straw sandal.

I'll just stroll by. Just one glance inside the room, that's all.

As Kiyone walked awkwardly past the door, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that the paper of the sliding door had started to turn a faint yellow, and through the tiny opening of the doorway she saw a three-panel dressing mirror. She also made out a legless chair, although no one was sitting in it.

Her clothes were damp in the rain, and the palms of her closed fists were moist with sweat.

Through the opening, she saw that one wall was decorated with a great number of white-faced dolls, and in front of them a futon was spread out on the floor. The coverings on the futon were filled out, as if someone were lying in it. But what Kiyone saw in the futon as she passed the opening of the doorway was the expressionless face of a doll looking right back at her.

*

The next day, when she had a break between chores, Kiyone went to visit Shizue, a young woman who had also worked as a maid at Torigoe Manor and had quit six months earlier, after marrying someone from the neighboring village. Kiyone was always welcome in Shizue's home, and she sometimes went there for advice with cooking and sewing.

"What's wrong?" Shizue asked her. "You seem down today."

Kiyone tried to smile, but it soon vanished.

The two women sat drinking tea on the wooden porch. Kiyone looked up and saw the hydrangeas in bloom. She thought the pale blue flowers looked much like the cloudy gray sky.

"Hey," Shizue said, "look at what I found." In the palm of her hand rested a tinhort-haired kitten.

"Oh, it's cute," said Kiyone, looking at the cat with wonder. "That's really something. Is it a little kitty doll?"

Shizue narrowed her eyes at Kiyone. "Don't be silly, she's the real thing. She got lost. She must have had a home somewhere, otherwise she wouldn't be so used to being held like this. If I see a lost animal, I always take it in."

Kiyone took a sip of her tea and asked, "Is your husband around today?"

Shizue laughed. "He's in the fields."

"Why did you laugh?"

"Because he's funny, that man. 'You stay at home,' he says."

Kiyone tilted her head, unsure what was funny about that.

"Because I'm pregnant."

"You're pregnant?"

Kiyone looked at Shizue's stomach, but it hadn't yet begun to swell. All she saw was the kitten rolling around on her friend's knees.

Kiyone was delighted. "That's great!"

"Well, thank you. But how are things with you? How's your work? I hope you're not finding it too difficult."

"No, it's going well. My father and I are very grateful to Masayoshi. It's just—" Kiyone hesitated, but Shizue kept drinking her tea, patiently waiting for her to continue.

In front of the porch was a small field with several thin poles wrapped in green vines blooming with tiny flowers. Off in the distance, a slouching figure of a man was slowly walking by.

"Ummm . . ." Kiyone hesitantly asked, "Have you ever seen his wife?"

"His wife? Yes, I have."

"What?"

"She was beautiful."

Kiyone looked at Shizue with a surprised expression. When she

hadn't seen Yuko through the opening of the door the day before, Kiyone had questioned whether or not Yuko actually existed. She had gone all the way to Shizue's house just to talk about it, and now she felt silly.

Shizue gently brushed the cat from her knee, got to her feet, and walked over to a tree that was growing in front of them. Its trunk was thin, but it was almost twice as tall as Kiyone. Small, shiny red fruit grew on the tree, and Shizue picked one of them and put it in her mouth.

She picked a few more and offered them to Kiyone. "Would you like to try one of the *goumi* fruit?"

Kiyone put one into her mouth and bit down on it. Tart, sweet juice spread over her tongue.

"What do you think? It's good, right? This is the time of year they're ripe. But some of the trees have bitter fruit, which can taste especially nasty if you're expecting it to be sweet."

Following Shizue's lead, Kiyone spit out the seed, then said, "That happened to me the other day. I only took one bite, and I spit it out immediately, but the terrible taste stayed in my mouth forever. I rinsed out my mouth with water, but it didn't help. That night, I felt nauseous and dizzy, and I couldn't sleep. It was so awful, I thought I'd die."

Kiyone put one more goumi fruit into her mouth and bit down on it.

With Shizue smiling in front of her, Kiyone felt enveloped by a serene happiness. She was without fear or doubt.

Kiyone rolled the remaining fruit around in the palm of her hand and whispered to herself, "Thank goodness."

Master Masayoshi wasn't seeing hallucinations or anything like that. Of course he wasn't. I've just been caught up in some foolish notion.

Kiyone asked, "Could you tell me more about his wife?"

Shizue tilted her head slightly, taking a moment to search her memory. "She had white skin."

"You mean she was white, like Caucasian?"

Shizue narrowed her eyes and laughed. "No, don't be silly. She was fair-skinned and slender. She and her husband always sat side by side on the veranda. I always wished I could have a marriage like they had."

Kiyone felt slightly jealous of her reminiscing friend.

"I was such a fool," Kiyone said.

Startled by the statement, Shizue asked, "Why?"

"Because I had been thinking she wasn't even there in Torigoe Manor. I haven't seen her this whole time. But really, what a foolish thought."

Now Shizue looked even more startled. “What are you talking about? His wife died two years ago. I’ve never seen anyone take the loss as hard as he did. It was frightening, the way he was crying and raving.”

It took a moment for Kiyone to understand the meaning of the words she was hearing. As they sunk in, one by one, Kiyone set her teacup down on the porch.

She rose to her feet and found them shaky. She felt dizzy, and she turned around to see Shizue’s puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong, Kiyone?”

What should I do? Should I tell her everything? Should I tell her about Masayoshi’s behavior, about the doll I saw through the opening of the doorway, about Yuko, the woman I haven’t seen? What would happen if I did tell her? If the rest of the village found out, how would they treat Masayoshi? The thought was unbearable. The clop clop of his shoes echoed in her mind, and she could see his figure bent over the hydrangeas as he talked of flowers. She had no idea what to do.

“Kiyone?” Shizue repeated.

The cat meowed.

But Kiyone didn’t hear either of them.

The tart, sweet fruit dropped from her hand and fell noiselessly to the ground.

*

“I’m going out for a while, Kiyone.”

When Kiyone saw Masayoshi off she made up her mind. Masayoshi was out of the house. Her emotions raged. It was the resolve borne of a terrible uncertainty.

With a *creak creak* she passed through the constant gloom of the hallway and stood before Masayoshi’s room. Inside should be only Yuko. Kiyone knelt before the sliding door and sat in the formal *seiza* position with her legs folded beneath her thighs. Drawing strength to still her trembling shoulders, she said, “Par—” Her voice cracked. *How relieved would I be to find that Yuko really is there on the other side of the sliding door before me*.

“Pardon me, it’s Kiyone. Ma’am, ma’am, it’s Kiyone, please answer. Please, could you answer . . .”

She waited a long time, but Kiyone never heard the slightest response.

“Ma’am! Please answer me! Ma’am!”

After a short pause, Kiyone, summoning all of her courage, put the fingers of her right hand upon the sliding door. As she tentatively slid

the door open, the opening grew ever wider, and at last she could see the entire room.

From where she still sat seiza, Kiyone slowly scanned the room from corner to corner. Faint yellow sunlight bleeding in through the paper door leading outside lit the room only dimly and created pools of darkness within. Girl dolls were there, half melted into the shadows, and when she tried to count them one by one, she realized the total would be more than fifty. Their blank bloodless faces seemed to be crying or laughing. Stranger still was the white futon spread out in front of the dolls. There Kiyone saw a white doll with long hair, like the one she had seen the day before, lying peacefully in the futon. Indeed, that doll had a strange and mysterious aura compared to the rest, and when she looked into its slender white face, she felt she was being drawn into a dreadful yet somehow dreamlike illusion.

In a panic, Kiyone drew her eyes away from the doll and turned her head to look at the opposite side of the room.

She saw nothing that could be called Yuko.

On the opposite side of the room was the sliding door of a closet with Mount Fuji painted on it in blue and a legless chair that Masayoshi probably sat in to write. Before the chair was a glossy wooden desk, on top of which quite a number of fountain pens were lined up waiting for their master's return. The sight made Kiyone feel somehow sad and lonely.

In one corner of the room, she saw an odd three-panel dressing mirror. Both side doors were closed, and for some reason a red string was fastened clockwise around their handles. But what made it odd was that compared to the rest of the objects in the room, it was old. Nothing was carved upon it, and the wood had no luster. But why, despite its age, hadn't it been replaced, remaining instead inside Torigoe Manor?

Kiyone removed the string and quietly opened the doors. The mirrors inside had splintered into a weblike network of cracks. Only in the corners of the panels were there small patches of uncracked mirror she could look into and see her face thrown straight back at her.

Just then, in one of those minute corners of uncracked mirror, Kiyone thought she saw the pale face of a woman. Kiyone let out a tiny scream and spun around, and at that moment, her right elbow bumped against the three-panel mirror, and several fragments of the glass shook loose and fell to the floor. But no matter how hard she strained her eyes to look, she could see no pale woman—or anyone else, for that matter—in the room. Terror welled up within her like a cold snake crawling along her spine.

She hurriedly gathered up the shards of broken glass and closed the doors of the mirror. She wound the red string around the knobs on the

doors, and without stopping to look over her shoulder, she fled into the dark hallway.

Crying from fear, she went to her room and cowered small in the corner, clutching the doll her father had made her.

4. THE MIRROR

"Yuko, I'm home," said Masayoshi as he opened the sliding door to his room. "Did anything out of the ordinary happen while I was gone?"

No, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"I see, that's good. Nobody came in here, right? That's a good thing."

But when Masayoshi happened to glance at the mirror in the corner of the room, he noticed something curious. He walked up to the mirror, and when he drew close to it, he let out a cry.

"What happened here? It's not good to lie, Yuko. Somebody came in here today, didn't they? And they opened this mirror, right? You can't lie to me like that, Yuko."

Why? Why don't you believe me? Nothing happened.

"That's not so, Yuko. Look at the string on this mirror. Since the mirror's old, it sometimes falls open. I keep a red string looped around the two knobs to keep it from opening."

What's the matter, then? Isn't it like that now?

"No, Yuko, you're wrong. I always wrap the string around clockwise, and here, look, today it's wrapped around counterclockwise.

Why would that be?"

Oh, that's because I opened it, dear. I opened the mirror.

Masayoshi opened the mirror and let out an even more surprised cry.

"Yuko, the mirror is broken. The shards should have fallen to the floor."

Dear, wasn't the mirror already broken?

"No, Yuko, you're wrong. The mirror was cracked, but none of the pieces were missing. But look, there are pieces missing here, and here. They should have fallen somewhere, but I don't see them anywhere, Yuko."

Masayoshi approached one of the many white-faced dolls, smoothly brushed its hair, and spoke gently. "Come, tell me the truth, Yuko. Kiyone came in here today, didn't she? You've been lying to cover up for her."

Yes, you're right. Kiyone was here.

"I see. But what were you doing then? Didn't you tell her that she

couldn't come in? Didn't you caution her not to touch that mirror?"

Oh, I'm sorry. When she came in here, I was in something of a daze. But luckily I awakened, and I told Kiyone to leave the room right away. I told her that. But please, dear, don't scold her.

"All right, Yuko, I won't. I'd just like her to return the pieces of the mirror."

The sliding door to the outside glowed red from the sunset. Only at that time did the faces of the dolls warm to a rosy color, almost as though they were flesh and blood babies.

5. YUKO

Kiyone couldn't take it anymore.

The night before, when she had gone to retrieve the dishes from outside Masayoshi's room, she had noticed something strange.

The many bowls on the wooden tray had been emptied as usual. The two pairs of chopsticks and two teacups had also been used. But why was there one dish that neither of them had touched, both their portions uneaten? Kiyone, unable to contain her curiosity, spoke to Masayoshi through the closed door.

"Master Masayoshi, may I ask you something?"

His reply came from inside the room. "What is it, Kiyone?"

His voice was as gentle as ever, and hearing it made Kiyone feel like her heart was being squeezed.

"Master Masayoshi, was there something wrong with the boiled horse mackerel I served tonight? Please be frank with me."

"No, there was absolutely nothing wrong with your dinner. It's just that Yuko and I cannot stand to eat horse mackerel. I never told you. I know it was incredibly rude of us, but neither Yuko nor I could eat any of it."

"But, but, both you and the lady dislike horse mackerel? Both of you hate it so much that you can't stand to eat a bite of it?"

"Yes, Kiyone, that's how it is."

Now that she thought about it, Kiyone remembered another time they both had left their food uneaten. At that time, she was inexperienced and hadn't known up from down. Unaware that they both had small appetites, she had made them a large meal.

Kiyone was struck by a sudden thought. They had each left half their meals. *Then, the master told me to cut both his and his wife's meals in half. What on earth did that mean? According to him, they both only ate half of what a typical person eats. Didn't that mean that both of their meals added up to precisely the amount for one person to eat? What did that mean? If what he said had all been a lie, then . . .*

No, it couldn't be. I don't want it to be. But if the woman called Yuko has already passed from this world . . .

Kiyone pictured Masayoshi posing as Yuko and eating both their meals.

First, Masayoshi, as himself, took a bite of his food with his chopsticks. Then, Masayoshi ate in Yuko's place. Next he whispered something to Yuko, who wasn't there, and mimicking her voice, he replied to himself.

Dinner continued like that until, unable to eat any more, he left half of each meal.

Of course the horse mackerel that Masayoshi couldn't eat remained on Yuko's plate as well.

Yuko was Masayoshi.

The doll that had been in the futon must have been sitting in front of Yuko's dinner tray. But Masayoshi believed that Yuko lived in that room with him. *What a nightmare*. Kiyone felt dizzy.

Master Masayoshi, didn't your wife Yuko pass away two years ago, and isn't she buried in the bamboo grove?

As Kiyone was walking back to her room, she couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Her tears fell into the bowls on the tray she carried, and the fl oor of the hallway *creak creak*ed away.

*

The next day, Kiyone came to a decision, triggered by Masayoshi's sudden departure.

"Kiyone, I have to make a bit of a trip after lunch. I probably won't be back until late."

Masayoshi was dressed in his finery, and he carried a large black briefcase he almost never took with him.

"Kiyone." He gazed straight into her eyes and said, "You are not to enter Yuko's room. Do you understand?" Kiyone was startled.

"All right? You are not to enter that room. Promise me."

"Yes, I understand." Her voice had the slightest quaver. "I won't enter your room."

After hearing her answer, Masayoshi left the mansion. He hadn't been wearing his sandals, and Kiyone, watching him leave from the front gate, was soon alone without even their familiar clop clop.

I will end this today, Master Masayoshi, Kiyone vowed in her heart. *When you come home today, the woman who lives inside your head will truly be gone from this world. Oh, you will probably hate me for it. You'll probably resent me for it. But I cannot bear it any longer. It's time for me and for you to stop dreaming. I believe that when you wake up, a*

magnificent, clear morning will await you.

*

"Ma'am, ma'am. I've brought your dinner."

Kiyone called into the room, but of course there came no reply. Just in case, she set Yuko's meal down in the hallway in front of the door. If the food was gone when she came back for the tray, she would know that Yuko had eaten it, and that Yuko really did exist.

*

I'm betraying the master, Kiyone thought as she used a funnel to transfer the kerosene that had been left in the stove into a two-liter bottle. A bare lightbulb dangled from the storage room ceiling, swinging its weak orange glow back and forth, and the kerosene glimmered darkly as it fl owed into the deep green bottle. When Kiyone glanced up, she could see on the shelf above her the row of wooden crates that had held the dolls, and each time her eyes came upon the word DOLLS she hastened her work.

When she had finished transferring the kerosene into the bottle, she brought it and a match to the center of Torigoe Manor's large garden.

From there, she wouldn't have to worry about the fire spreading, no matter what she burned.

The sun had already hidden itself, and as the world settled into darkness, Kiyone could no longer see the line dividing the bamboo grove and the sky. The moon and the stars would not show themselves that cloudy night.

I will remember this darkness for the rest of my life. This bottomless pit of darkness, this darkness *blocking out the bamboo and the stone lanterns that are right over there—the dark of this night will torment me for the rest of my life.*

*

Kiyone carried a lit candle as she went to get Yuko. The flickering light danced across her face.

She *creak creak*ed down the hallway to Masayoshi's room. He was away, and no one would be inside. If what he had said was true, then Yuko would be in there alone. But when Kiyone inspected the tray in front of the door, she felt dejected.

The meal was exactly as it had been when she left it there. There was no sign that anybody had even laid a finger on it.

Master Masayoshi, if a woman named Yuko really lived in this room, shouldn't even a small portion of this meal have been eaten? Yuko died two years ago. Aren't you just seeing an illusion of your departed wife inside that doll?

Feeling like she was about to cry, Kiyone said, "I'm coming in," and slid open the door. But even after she turned on the light, she didn't see anyone there—only the rows of white dolls. When the warm light of the lightbulb fell upon the dolls, their puffy white cheeks and softly flowing black hair floated in the darkness, and Kiyone gasped.

How many years has it been since I was surrounded like this by white-faced dolls? Kiyone thought back to the time she spent the night in her father's doll workshop.

Kiyone was afraid of dolls. She found it creepy the way the girls seemed to stare at her. *Are they about to start moving? The second I take my eyes off them, will they discard those expressionless masks and grin? Will they leap onto my shoulders in their disheveled red kimono like bawling children?* Kiyone was terrified. The thoughts were enough to make her want to flee from the room.

Two futon mattresses were laid out inside the room. One must have been where Masayoshi slept. The other should have held Yuko.

But however Kiyone looked at it, the white face atop the futon looked not like a human, but like a doll.

This doll is "Yuko." Kiyone was convinced.

My father may even have made this one.

Kiyone removed the comforter and saw that the figure was wearing white pajamas. She realized that she had been washing clothes worn by a doll, and she couldn't keep the thought of it from her mind no matter how hard she tried.

All this time, haven't I just been a puppet for that doll?

But I'm not the only one she's been manipulating.

Kiyone picked up Yuko.

On her way out of the room she turned out the lights, and the rows of dolls were covered in darkness.

Could they have been laughing just then?

Or crying?

*

Kiyone laid Yuko face up in the center of the garden and lit her candle. The flame wavered and jostled shadows across Kiyone's face and Yuko's expressionless visage. The candle's single dim light seemed

to surface in the garden.

This doll is blinding Master Masayoshi. He calls it by the name of his wife who now rests in her grave and cares for it as if it were a woman.

Without hesitation, Kiyone splashed the kerosene over Yuko. The oil seeped into Yuko's white clothes, turning them vaguely transparent. Kiyone tipped the bottle until nothing remained, and then she set it gently on the ground.

Yuko's body, lying on the ground soaked in kerosene, reflected the candlelight. Kiyone thought, *This doll really is pretty—prettier than any woman alive.*

Quietly she lit the fire.

Yuko's white oil-soaked clothes were instantly engulfed in flame, and the flames flared high. The fire around Yuko was hundreds of times larger than the light of the candle, and the garden flooded with light. *It's as bright as day*, thought Kiyone. She watched the flames and felt their heat on her eyes.

The doll is burning away. The doll he loved is burning away. The words echoed again and again inside her mind, and she took one step back from the flames.

Even after fully enveloping Yuko, the fire continued to torment the corpse with its unceasing fury.

Embers floated up and whirled high into the windless sky. From far heights the embers appeared as red points in the sky dark with no moon or starlight.

*

Suddenly came Masayoshi's violent cry.

"What's happening? Yuko! Yuko!"

He tossed aside his briefcase at Torigoe Manor gate and desperately dashed to the edge of the fire.

"Ahhh, this is—! This is—!" he screamed again and again, unable to find any other words. In one swift motion, he swept off his kimono and laid it over the fire. He threw himself on top, and the garden was left with only the light of the candle and that of the flames that still burned where the kerosene had soaked into the ground.

"Master Masayoshi! That's a doll! There is no Yuko! Come to your senses, master!"

But as if Kiyone wasn't even there, Masayoshi kept crying out, *Yuko, Yuko,* as tears streamed from his eyes.

"Master Masayoshi! Look at me, master!"

Masayoshi, having extinguished the flames with his own body, tightly embraced Yuko, who had lost all traces of the beauty she'd had

before the fl ames burned her. He pressed his cheek against hers and apologized over and over.

“Oh Yuko, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

From every corner of his being, he yelled until his voice wavered and finally shattered as if his soul itself had broken away. It pained Kiyone to see him so pitiful.

Masayoshi wept over Yuko in his arms, and Kiyone clung to his back and began to sob.

The fire of the candle she had thrown to the ground dwindled, and the few patches of flames on the earth reflected their flickering light in the tears that ran down her cheeks.

6. BELLADONNA

The hospital’s old wooden door caught before grudgingly sliding open at Masayoshi’s touch. Inside, a miasma of medicine and must hung in the air, and an unpleasant feeling took hold in his chest. The brown hospital slippers were also old, and he searched for but did not find a pair without some amount of damage.

In contrast to the dim, dank interior of the hospital, the world outside the windows was bright with the early summer light.

Masayoshi passed through the waiting room with its black leather chairs that had patches of yellow stuffing poking out here and there, walked down the aged wooden hallway, and was led to a room where a doctor sat waiting.

The doctor was young, his face serious, and he met Masayoshi with a gaze that felt ominous.

Masayoshi was nervous, unaware he was squeezing his handkerchief.

*

“Oh, I’m glad. I really am. I’m sure you are too, Father. Master Masayoshi is going to be released from the hospital very soon. He just has to have a little talk with the doctor first, and then he’ll be free to go. I was worried, so I asked the doctor about it. That’s when he told me. He said, ‘The most important thing for him now is a calm place where he can relax.’ That’s what he said. The master’s talking with him right now. You know him, don’t you, Father? You were friends with him.”

When Kiyone heard that Masayoshi wouldn’t have to stay in the hospital, she was overjoyed. To her, the best news was that though he

still was in severe shock, he would soon be able to return to his normal life.

*

“Shall we talk about it?” said the doctor as Masayoshi took a seat on the stool.

At Masayoshi’s slightest movement, the stool let out a high-pitched grating slash of a sound.

“Yuko was . . . Yuko was burning. When I came home, Yuko was in flames. Oh, I can still see it now.”

Masayoshi realized his voice was quavering. He closed his eyes, and on the back of his eyelids he saw the flames dancing around Yuko. The flames never stopped.

“Oh, Yuko . . . Doctor, when will Yuko return to me . . .”

With a furrowed brow the doctor answered, “No, it would be best for you not to see her again. The body is in a terrible state.”

A drop of sweat slid slowly down the middle of Masayoshi’s back. He wiped sweat from his forehead and it clung to the back of his hand.

“I understand how you must feel,” said the doctor, pity in his face.

“Yuko was my second wife. After my first wife died, all I had left of her was a three-panel mirror.”

Masayoshi slouched forward, and the stool made a loud screeching that quickly faded into a corner of the room.

“It was cracked and utterly useless, but I’d kept it to remember her and how she was before she died of tuberculosis. So when Kiyone lost a piece of the mirror, I was saddened.”

“When did your first wife pass away?”

“Two years ago. I gave her a proper burial and made her a fine gravestone. When she was alive, the villagers treated her unreasonably.”

“I see. So that’s two wives you’ve lost in succession . . .”

Masayoshi paused. “It was fate.”

“Fate?”

“I never thought that Yuko would die in such a way . . .”

Masayoshi and the doctor fell quiet. The long silence lay over the room, and for a moment Masayoshi wondered if all sound had vanished from the earth.

Finally, the doctor broke the silence.

“I’ve spoken with Kiyone.” His face went pale. “There are quite a few differences between your stories. Tell me, why would that be?”

For a short time, Masayoshi was silent. He set down his folded

handkerchief on the wooden table as if he were letting go of something heavy, and then he looked the doctor in the eyes and spoke.

"You might not believe me."

"What won't I believe?"

Masayoshi didn't reply. Instead, as the doctor watched, he quietly unfolded the handkerchief with trembling fingers.

Inside were two small, glossy, pitch-black berries that seemed to swallow all light.

"You might not believe me."

"What won't I believe?"

Masayoshi didn't reply. Instead, as the doctor watched, he quietly unfolded the handkerchief with trembling fingers.

Inside were two small, glossy, pitch-black berries that seemed to swallow all light.

They were the berries of the plant that grew next to the gate of Torigoe Manor.

The doctor looked closely at the black berries on the table and asked, "What are these?"

"I found those berries on the floor of Kiyone's room. You see how they are small and glossy? They're from a plant that grows on the grounds of Torigoe Manor. It's called a belladonna."

"Belladonna?"

"Yes . . ." said Masayoshi, his lips violently trembling and his face pale as though he were struggling not to retch. "Belladonna.

The poisonous berry used in the murder of Hamlet's father."

The doctor, who had begun to reach out for the black berry, froze his hand, his face a dreadful color.

Masayoshi continued. "I had a friend of mine in one of the publishing houses look into it for me."

"But what do these berries have to do with what happened?" Masayoshi wrinkled his sweaty brow, unsure of where to start.

There was quite a bit left that needed explaining. "This story doesn't have a direct connection to the tragedy, but . . ."

The doctor nodded and urged him on.

"I'd heard it from a friend. Something that happened—no, a rumor, I should say, of something that happened decades ago at the base of a mountain."

Masayoshi and the doctor both were sweating, yet they looked cold.

*

Several decades ago, a group of men had gone deep into the mountains to gather plants for food. It was just before nightfall when the men discovered a bush they didn't recognize.

On it grew small but delicious-looking berries.

The men wondered what they tasted like. Figuring they couldn't find out just by looking, one of the men grabbed a berry and ate it. That was his undoing.

The other men circled around the one who ate the berry and asked what it tasted like. But the man didn't answer. Instead, he dropped to his hands and knees and ran off like a wild beast. They said his bloodshot eyes had glittered.

The dumbstruck men watched him vanish into the mountains.

After a time, an eerie howl, not that of human or wolf, echoed three times through the mountains.

Wind blew in through an open window.

"After that, they went farther into the mountains from where the howl had come, and they found the dead body of the man with foam running from his mouth."

The doctor frowned and drew his body back, and his chair gave a sharp creak. "After he ate the poisonous berry, he thought he was a wolf, and then he died? What does that have to do with Kiyone?"

Neither Masayoshi nor the doctor could avert their eyes from the black berries on the table. They could hear the far-off sound of someone running through the hallways, but it sounded like it came from an entirely different dimension from the room Masayoshi was in.

"I believe that she ate the belladonna berry, fatal at even a tenth of a gram."

The doctor's eyes jumped wide open. "If the berry is fatal, shouldn't she be dead? Yet she's still alive."

"Just because some amount is called a fatal dosage, that doesn't mean that it has been measured and tested on humans, so it's an imprecise amount. And maybe she spit it out after biting into it, or it just affects some people less than others. The fact is that she is still alive. She survived it."

"I see what you're getting at. You mean to say that Kiyone is in a state similar to that of the man who ate the poisonous berry and became a wolf."

"No, not quite. I don't think her condition is a symptom of consuming the atropine, the primary active agent in belladonna. Rather, I believe it is the aftereffects of the fierce shock when she ate the 'devil's cherries.' In other words, she ate the fruit of the belladonna plant and survived. But the price she paid for her life was a state of chronic delirium. That's what I believe happened."

"And in a state of delirium, the line between delusion and reality

blurs, and consciousness becomes clouded."

"Exactly. How horrible!" Masayoshi moaned, his grief escaping. "Once, when Kiyone was a young child, she was locked inside her father's doll workshop for an entire night. I heard that for a time after, she had a terrible fear of girl dolls. That terrifying experience intertwined with the delirium caused by the devil's cherries, and Kiyone could no longer easily distinguish dolls from humans. Now the line between humans and dolls is hazy to her."

The doctor opened his eyes wide. "Kiyone became convinced that Yuko was a doll all because of that?"

"It was all the fault of that black berry."

Without Masayoshi so much as pointing his finger, the two turned their eyes toward the small berries atop the table.

"Belladonna is the devil's herb. And the devil's cherry made Kiyone see a fantasy. Incredible. The belladonna planted a fantasy in her head —that Yuko the person didn't exist, but that she was instead a doll."

"And, under the spell of the devil's cherry, Kiyone set the doll on fire."

Masayoshi drew his hands to his face and started to cry through gritted teeth. "I still can't believe it!"

"A hell of a thing. Such a tragedy—for both Yuko and Kiyone.

Kiyone was unknowingly possessed by belladonna. Was she nothing more than its puppet?" the doctor wondered.

"But why didn't you let Kiyone in your room? Why didn't you introduce her to Yuko? It makes no sense to me."

"Yuko also . . ." Masayoshi spoke in a nasal voice. "Yuko also had pulmonary tuberculosis. I didn't want Kiyone to get too near, in case she were to be infected. Her own father, her only relative, had died from the disease just before she started working for me. So I alone did all the nursing. I kept Yuko's tuberculosis a secret from everyone. Even Kiyone. You probably understand—the icy looks from closed-minded villagers. I didn't want to tell anybody about my wife's illness. I didn't want them hurling at her the same terrible abuses that had been thrown at my first wife."

The room filled with silence, and Masayoshi felt as though he were being crushed under some heavy weight. The ground grew soft beneath his feet; he felt like he might sink down into it at any moment.

His arms were covered with cold sweat. When the doctor sighed, Masayoshi straightened up in his chair. It creaked.

"Please listen to me," said the doctor. "That night, Yuko didn't eat the dinner Kiyone had prepared. And Kiyone said she didn't respond when she called out to her. Yuko didn't resist when Kiyone picked her up, and she didn't try to flee when the kerosene was being poured on

her. Is there an explanation for that? Why did Yuko let Kiyone do anything she wanted to her?

Masayoshi thought it over. He felt sick. It could have been due to the room's poor ventilation or the heat. But he was hopelessly sad—disconsolate.

"Yuko often had these dazed spells. She would just blankly stare off at a point in space, motionless. Yes, just like a doll. When she got in such a state, it was difficult to rouse her from it. Sometimes I could roughly shake her shoulders or shout her name right next to her ear, but it was rare for her to snap out of it on her own. So even if she were laid down on the ground . . ."

He closed his eyes and saw Yuko's burning figure.

I'm sorry. Every time he saw her he had a need to apologize.

I'm sorry.

I am the source of tragedy.

"Oh, the belladonna berry." The doctor breathed the words as if letting out a sigh. "This thing here on the table set a trap for Kiyone and Yuko. There's no other way to put it. But why was such a dreadful plant, a plant capable of obliterating the line between humans and dolls in the mind of a young woman, growing on your land?"

Fingertips still on his forehead, Masayoshi lowered his head in anguish, but finally, in a somber tone, he spoke.

"Torigoe Manor has a long and famous history. It's a long history, but the truth is, Torigoe blood does not flow through my veins."

A slight tremor entered his voice. "My mother told me a story that happened some generations ago. A woman and her young daughter collapsed in front of Torigoe Manor. That was the beginning of our doom."

"Your doom?"

"Yes. The master of the mansion back then should never have aided that woman. My mother never said it in so many words, but I think that woman was trying to gain favor with the master of Torigoe Manor. No, I'm certain of it. And if you wonder how, why else would she have collapsed in front of that particular mansion?"

Masayoshi was forlorn.

"The master of the house had a wife at the time, but she died soon after that woman and her child came to the mansion. And then he made that woman his new wife."

"His new wife . . ."

"Yes. But that wasn't the end of it. Soon after that woman became a member of the house, the master died too!"

The doctor gulped.

"That woman and her child took over Torigoe Manor. I'm a descendant of the child and have no Torigoe blood in me."

Masayoshi could no longer hold back his tears.

“The sudden deaths of the master of Torigoe Manor and his wife. Oh, my heart could just burst! My ancestors poisoned them and seized the house, of that I have no doubt. My mother told me the child was holding a flower when they came to the mansion. Now I know what that flower was. The girl had been carrying a belladonna flower. The tuberculosis isn’t the only reason the villagers look coldly on our house. No, I fear they must know that it was my ancestors who took Torigoe Manor.”

The doctor tried to calm Masayoshi, but the writer stood up and shook his tightly clenched fists.

“It was fate. A cursed destiny passed down from one generation to the next. Revenge of the Torigoe line! There’s nothing I can do. I fear that the person who killed Yuko was me, the descendant of those who made a deal with the devil! No, not just Yuko! My first wife . . . Kiyone—I am the root of all their misfortune!”

Masayoshi looked up at the ceiling and screamed, and as the tears streamed from his eyes, he didn’t wipe them away. The doctor sat, his eyes closed and his brow creased, silently waiting for Masayoshi’s tears to dry.

*

Was it inevitable?

His eyes upon the black berries, unaware that he was standing now, he quietly spoke, his heart stripped of all color.

“Had all this been decided from the moment that mother and her child with the devil’s flower began their act at the gates of Torigoe Manor?”

The doctor was quiet for a time, but when Masayoshi wrapped his handkerchief back around the berries on the table and started to lift them, he grabbed the writer’s hand. Masayoshi could feel the doctor’s hand tremble.

“Burn them immediately,” said the doctor. “Not just these berries, but all of the belladonna growing on your land. And then, come to get her. I will cure her. No, even if I can’t cure her, you will come to get her. Aren’t the two of you alone now? Once your heart has calmed, have a long talk with her. I know it will be tough, for both you and Kiyone, but in time you will need to find acceptance. End this curse, and everything else with it, with your generation.”

The doctor released the belladonna berries, and Masayoshi gripped them tightly and slumped down to his knees. Even after the doctor quietly slipped from the room, Masayoshi’s sobs could be heard inside.

*

Somewhere far off inside the hospital, a baby cried.

Hey, Father, aren't you listening? I've found someone I like. A fine person. You like him too.

Kiyone was talking to a doll, her father's, that sat beside her in her bed. Bright sunlight shone in through the open window, casting its gentle rays upon her, and the white hospital curtains billowing in the breeze seemed to beckon to her.

Father, it's warm out today. When we get back home, I'll have to hang his laundry outside to dry.

But when the doll didn't talk back to her, Kiyone tilted her head.

She felt a little lonely.

Glossary

tatami: Traditional Japanese floor covering made of woven straw; one mat measures approximately three feet by six feet, and a six-mat room measures about 108 square feet.

kotatsu: A low wooden table with a heat source underneath.

towelket: Lightweight terrycloth blanket.

yukata: Casual summer kimono, usually made from cotton.

kanji: Japanese alphabet based on Chinese characters, part of the Japanese writing system, along with katakana, hiragana, and the Latin alphabet (Romaji).

hiragana: Japanese syllable alphabet, part of the Japanese writing system, along with katakana, kanji, and the Latin alphabet (Romaji).

goumi: Round or oval red fruit with an acidic taste.

seiza: Formal seated posture, with knees bent and the legs under the thighs.

About the Author

Otsuichi won the sixth annual Jump Novel and Nonfiction prize with his debut novel *Summer, Fireworks, and My Corpse* when he was seventeen (he was sixteen when he wrote it). He writes horror novels and short stories as well as novels for young adults, and he is also a filmmaker. Major works include the novel *Goth*, which was made into a manga as well as a feature film, and his collection *Zoo*, which was also made into a film. Works available in English include *Summer, Fireworks, My Corpse*; *Zoo*; and *Black Fairy Tale*.

Born Hirotaka Adachi in 1978 in Fukuoka prefecture, Otsuichi graduated from Kurume Industrial College and Toyohashi University of Technology with a degree in ecological engineering. He also took part in the university science fiction club. He enjoys playing American video games, watching movies, reading, and spending time with his children.

About the Cover Artist

Norio Kozima was born in Kumamoto in 1968, raised in a coal-mining town in Fukuoka, and now lives in Tama Ward, Tokyo. He studied oil paintings at the Art Department at the Tokyo Zokei University and the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. After various job experiences, he has worked as an illustrator since about the turn of the century.

He loves rock 'n' roll, bookshops, fishing, guitar, and booze, but he hates nuclear power and fascists.